



Pre-Budget Submission

Federal Budget 2020-2021

**Prepared by
COTA Australia**

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About COTA Australia

COTA Australia is the national consumer peak body for older Australians. Its members include State and Territory COTAs (Councils on the Ageing) in each of the eight States and Territories of Australia. COTA Australia and the State and Territory COTAs have around 40,000 individual members and supporters and more than 1,000 seniors' organisation members, which jointly directly represent over 500,000 older Australians.

COTA Australia's focus is on national policy issues from the perspective of all older Australians as citizens and consumers and we seek to promote, improve and protect the circumstances and wellbeing of older people in Australia. Information about, and the views of, our constituents and members are gathered through a wide variety of consultative and engagement mechanisms and processes.

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Foreword

COTA Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide this Pre-Budget submission of measures that we urge the Australian Government to implement as part of the 2020/21 Federal Budget. The 2020/21 Pre-Budget submission comes at a key time for older Australians, as Australia is in the midst of a Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, the Australian Government has commissioned its Retirement Incomes Review and the latest 5-yearly Intergenerational Report is in development for release in July 2020.

COTA Australia is committed to building a society that values the contributions of all people, including older people. Rather than seeing older Australians as a future burden, older Australians must be embraced for the contributions they can and do make. At the core of this submission is the idea that the barriers older people face to full participation in society can - and must - be eliminated. Fundamentally, we are committed to older people having choice and control over their lives, and to exercise and strengthen the rights of older people in a range of fields – including health, employment, finances, housing, energy and communications.

As demonstrated by the breadth of the portfolio areas included in this Pre-Budget submission, issues facing older Australians sit across a wide range of departments. Accordingly, COTA Australia's key asks this election is for a **Whole-of-Government Strategy for Older Australians** in order to coordinate the various components of the Australian Government's activities to enhance the lives of older Australians.

Informed by our experience in the aged care sector, as well as our ongoing interaction with the Royal Commission, COTA Australia will release an Aged Care **Transformation Agenda** in the first quarter of 2020. This blueprint for reforming our Aged Care system to better reflect the needs of consumers will include a range of steps Government can take now, building on reforms already being implemented or previously agreed, along with steps to be taken in the budget in order to prepare Government for the Royal Commission recommendations.

For older Australians still in the workforce, or seeking to re-enter the workforce, we have also proposed some strategies to support an **older workforce**, and to provide greater opportunities to develop the skills and retraining to meet the needs of a changing workforce.

Meeting the increasing **cost of living** proves a large challenge for many older people – particularly for those who have significant out-of-pocket healthcare, energy or communications costs, or are struggling to meet the skyrocketing costs of private rental. Proposals to increase Newstart and Commonwealth Rental Assistance are also designed to reduce poverty and safeguard against homelessness.

Finally, safeguarding **human rights of older people** to be free from abuse and neglect is a major priority for COTA Australia. Plans to tackle elder abuse, to enhance protections against ageism and age discrimination in all its forms.

Older people are directly or indirectly impacted by all areas of government policy. Whilst this submission does not include a complete compendium of COTA Australia's policies, it does highlight specific priorities or initiatives that, if addressed, could eliminate those key barriers older people face. The flow-on economic and social advantages of including older people are immeasurable. More than this – it acknowledges and elevates the status of older people in all areas of community life.

Summary of COTA Australia proposed budget measures

Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet measures:

- Develop a whole-of-government strategy for older Australians.
- Develop and publish a check list of progress made on implementing the *More Choices for a Longer Life* measures.
- Fund the development of peer education initiatives to support older Australians, including a focus to support vulnerable Australians.
- Develop initiatives to support older Australians transition to government online services. Include appropriate digital inclusion for older Australians accessing government services; and the continuation of, and improvements to, offline service delivery.

Department of Health (Dental and Oral Health) Measures:

- That the Commonwealth increase its contribution towards the *National Partnership Agreement on Public Dental Services*, in order to reduce wait times for vulnerable cohorts such as older Australians and include performance benchmarks to provide support for people in Residential Aged Care Facilities. Such increased funding should include a requirement for state and territory contributions to remain at current levels or increase; the publication of annual wait times from point of registration; that a portion of funding be used to reduce waitlists using private dental services; and that a portion of funds be used to trial mobile dental services that deliver services to aged care facilities.

Department of Health (General and Mental Health) Measures:

- Design programs for 'older Australians aged 65 and over who are on low incomes' and 'older Australians living in Residential Aged Care Facilities' as two focus groups within the National Women's and National Men's Health Strategies.
- Increase preventative programs to support the health of older Australians - such as health literacy, and health promotion. Consider the use of peer education and health advocacy models.
- Develop greater coordination and integration in the health system with other care support systems, such as aged care, home care, and support from the community.
- Increase funding and support for Advanced Care Planning and Advanced Care Directives education. Fully and equitably consider the mental health needs of older people in the development, funding and implementation of all mental health strategies.

Department of Health (Aged Care Measures):

- Allocate in the 2020-21 budget funding provisions to support the implementation of the Royal Commission recommendations from December 2020.
- Provide funding for consumer consultation and input into the design and implementation of the future aged care system.
- Fund an additional \$2-\$2.5 billion per year in home-based care services to reduce wait times so that no consumer will need to wait more than 60 days and develop an implementation plan to deliver this within two years.

- Fund the transition of the existing *Aged Care Navigators* pilots to a full program of Navigators available across the country.
- Announce and fund the implementation plan to place the funding of residential care into the hands of consumers in accordance with the recommendations of the Impact Study just completed.

Department of the Treasury Measures:

- Fund consumer consultations about any proposed policy changes to retirement income policies in light of the fact base established by and findings of the Retirement Income Review.
- A body independent of Government, that includes representatives of older Australians, should be established to provide advice and impact modelling to Government on proposed changes to retirement incomes and a report on retirement incomes once every 5 years.
- Fund financial literacy programs that educate older Australians (including those with low and modest incomes) on how to manage their finances in current financial environments. Consider use of peer education models.
- Introduce a budget impact report that includes a reinstated Women's Budget Statement and the gross and net expected taxation revenue for a range of different taxation policies.

Department of Education, Skills and Employment Measures:

- Annually publish the proportion of successful applicants aged 50 and over accepted for employment (permanent and contract) in the Australian Public Service (APS) as compared to all applicants of the same age cohort (aged 50 and over) to the APS. For comparative purposes, publish the proportions of successful applicants aged 49 and under accepted for employment to the APS, in relation to all applicants of the same age cohort (49 and under).
- Model benchmark mature-age employee levels by all Australian Government Departments and trial approaches within the Australian Public Service to retain and employ mature age workers.
- Provide practical guidance to employers on mature age employment retention and attraction.
- Implement initiatives to reduce and ultimately prevent age-related bias and unlawful discriminatory practices towards older people in employment.
- Improve the Skills Checkpoint for Older Workers program by publishing the statistics of participant response to the online tool and integrate the program with the Better Ageing 45 years and 65 years check-ups.
- Increase skills development support for older people, including in the area of retraining.
- Develop specialist job seeker agencies specifically skilled in the needs of older unemployed people.
- Develop further initiatives to address the underemployment of older Australians in collaboration with older people, employer peaks, and the COTA Federation.

Department of Social Security measures:

- Raise the Rate of Newstart by increasing the maximum single rate of Newstart by \$75 per week

- Remove the Liquid Asset Waiting Period for unemployed people over the age of 55 years. In the meantime, Government should remove legislation proposing to increase the waiting period from 13 weeks to 26 weeks currently before the Senate.
- Increase the maximum Commonwealth Rental Assistance (CRA) by 40% and benchmark future rises in the CRA to median rents. Review the structure of CRA to ensure that Commonwealth funds provide maximum assistance to the most vulnerable, generally in the private rental market.
- Make Australians with a disability over the age of 65 years a key demographic considered by the National Disability Strategy 2020 and beyond.
- Increase investment in social housing (public and community housing) and implement initiatives to increase the availability of affordable housing.
- Introduce an Internet Supplement for older Australians on low and modest incomes.
- Provide more funding and support to address social isolation, both in the wider community and in residential aged care

Attorney General’s Department measures:

- Provide six monthly reporting on the progress of the National Elder Abuse Prevention Strategy For the next three years and annual reporting thereafter.
- Seek ways to strengthen the human rights protections of older Australians.
- Amend the Age Discrimination Act to ensure that employers are clear they may proactively seek mature age applicants on a non-exclusive basis.
- Develop practical guidance to employers on mature age employment recruitment, retention and attraction.

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Cities and Regional Development measures:

- Implement the recommendations of the Telecommunications Consumer Safeguards Review.

Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources measures:

- Implement the ACCC recommendations on energy concessions in a manner that delivers a uniform national approach to electricity concessions.

Department of Foreign Affairs measures:

- Elevate Australia’s engagement within the United Nations Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing to a point where Australia is seen as a regional leader on the need for an international mechanism on the rights of older people.

Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet

Whole-of-Government Strategy for older Australians

COTA Australia commends the Government for the work being done through its *More Choices for a Longer Life* Strategy originating in the 2018 Budget and being monitored by the More Choices Interdepartmental Committee. Specifically, the 2018 Budget package included a commitment to 42 measures across a wide range of areas, including:

- Aged Care;
- Jobs and skills;
- Finance for a longer life;
- Supporting choice and a healthy long life; and
- Safeguards quality and rights.

COTA Australia welcomes the Prime Minister's commitment to COTA Australia that the government will publicly report on progress with *More Choices for a Longer Life* across all portfolios and timeframes. To fulfil this commitment COTA Australia is seeking an annual report 'scorecard' that provides insight and transparency around the implementation status and program successes of the various measures under *More Choices for a Longer Life*, and a process for key stakeholder involvement with the IDC on a quarterly basis.

Building on the work of the Interdepartmental Committee implementing these programs for older Australians, COTA Australia believes the next step is a Whole-of-Government Strategy for older Australians. The proposed 5-year strategy, along with continued annual reporting, would provide a strategic framework to coordinate measures addressing the challenges faced by older people. Further it would provide a consistent approach to the development and delivery of current and future Australian Governments activities for older Australians.

Digital Inclusion Measures

Modern innovations which reduce offline and traditional 'shop front' services often accompany moves towards focusing exclusively on an online environment. Such an approach can leave less digitally literate individuals with fewer options to access essential services and support. It is particularly concerning when Government services and supports increasingly transition to an online only environment, creating a significant challenge for some cohorts such as older Australians to effectively engage with Government.

While overall most older Australians are digitally engaged, the *Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2019*¹ identified Australians over 65 as the least digitally included group. COTA recognises this is not an issue exclusively for older Australians with people on lower levels of income, education and employment experiencing low rates of digital inclusion and an increasing 'digital inclusion gap' between richer and poorer Australians. Cost remains a significant barrier to digital inclusion, with many not able to afford the ongoing costs of internet plans (see '*NBN access and affordability*' discussed in this submission). Additionally, low-income, low education, and unemployed Australians are most likely to be among the four million Australians that opt for a mobile-only service, which

¹ Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, 2019, Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2019, RMIT University and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra.

further diminishes equitable access. The success of programs of peer education and digital mentors² demonstrate the value of engaging peers to train and support other older Australians.

Efforts must be taken to develop and implement strategies and initiatives to support digital access for all Australians. Government should also be supporting people to transition to government online services and must in addition continue to improve the offline service delivery for those who cannot, or do not want to, transition to an online environment.

Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet measures:

- Develop a whole-of-government strategy for older Australians.
- Develop and publish a check list of progress made on implementing the *More Choices for a Longer Life* measures.
- Fund the development of peer education initiatives to support older Australians develop digital literacy, including a focus to support vulnerable Australians.
- Develop initiatives to support older Australians transition to government online services. Include appropriate digital inclusion for older Australians accessing government services; and ensure the continuation of, and improvements to, offline service delivery.

² Dezuanni, M. L., Marshall, A., Cross, A., Burgess, J., & Mitchell, P. (2019). Digital mentoring in Australian communities: A report prepared for Australia Post.

Department of Health

Oral and Dental Health Measures

The oral and dental health system along with associated funding options are currently structured similarly for all the adult population in Australia. Such an approach fails to recognise that the associated health, economic and service access issues are considerably different for older people, particularly for those on low incomes and those living in residential aged care facilities.

The health implications associated with oral and dental health issues are significant for older people. Poor oral health compromises healthy ageing. Indeed there is a link between oral health and a range of chronic conditions and even reduced functional capacity³. Oral and dental care for older people in various types of residential aged care is often conducted on an ad hoc basis, with little structure to such services, and access to publicly-funded services is limited.

Mobile dental services are an effective way to reach people in residential aged care, or for those for whom travel is difficult. There are currently many State and Territory jurisdictions piloting mobile dental services, designed specifically to meet the needs of people living in residential aged care facilities.

The National Partnership Agreement on Public Dental Services for adults provided states and territories with \$350.3 million from 1 January 2017 to 30 June 2020, for services to around 580,000 adult public dental payments. COTA recognises that some older Australians will self-fund or use private health insurance to fund their dental needs, while others will seek no dental care. However, for those who seek dental/oral care via the public dental system, we are disturbed by the continued reports of increased wait times until dental work is completed.

We recognise that any future agreement from 2020 may require additional funds from the Commonwealth to reduce the wait times that older Australians, particularly those on low incomes and who live in a residential aged care facility. To ensure consumers receive benefits from additional investment by the Australian Government, we would recommend that:

- 1) The Commonwealth only contribute additional funds in the future NPA if the current level of contribution by the state or territory remains at the CPI adjusted amount in the current NPA, or higher.
- 2) The Commonwealth publish annual wait times from 'registration' on the waitlist, until service is provided and develop appropriate performance benchmarks by the end of the National Partnership period.
- 3) That a portion of increased funding through the NPA (and thus through the various state run public dental programs) be tied to the delivery of dental/oral health services in the private system for priority populations such as older Australians on low incomes. Such measures as dental 'vouchers' or other mechanisms should be designed to increase the geographical availability of public dental services and contribute to a reduction in wait times for public dental services.
- 4) That a portion of increased funding be tied to a trial of mobile dental services in every jurisdiction and that this trial includes within its remit delivery of services to residents of residential aged care facilities.

³ Avlund, K. Holm-Petersen, P. Schroll, O. (2001). Functional Ability and Oral Health Among Older People: A Longitudinal Study from age 75 to 80. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*. 49:7.

Health Literacy and other preventative health strategies

At the core of COTA Australia's vision for older Australians is a health system in which safe and high-quality care is determined by health and medical need, not by the age of the consumer or their ability to contribute financially towards their healthcare.

COTA Australia recognises that there are a number of national strategic frameworks being developed to build a consumer-centred approach to preventative health. Specifically:

- National Preventative Health Strategy (*in development*);
- National Strategic Framework for Chronic Conditions;
- National Obesity Strategy;
- National Tobacco Strategy;
- Health and Hospitals Reform Agreement.

Targeting modifiable risk factors is a key pillar of preventative health. Investing well in preventative health across the age spectrum will reduce costs long-term and improve quality of life. Recreation-based initiatives that are specifically tailored to older people have the double-benefit of improving long-term health outcomes whilst having the immediate benefit of improved social and community engagement. Programs targeting older Australians such as COTA's Strength for Life⁴ and 'Eat to Cheat Ageing'⁵ programs are examples of important initiatives for older Australians.

There is a considerable need to improve health literacy for older Australians and ensure access to health promotion. Navigating the pathways through the health system and other care support systems for older people can be a significant issue, for instance, when an older person is in hospital and needs to decide on their next place to live due to health and mobility consideration. This may be aged care in their home, or living with family members, or with support from their community, or in a residential care facility.

Mental Health

Mental health must continue to be a Government priority. COTA notes the Productivity Commission's current review into Australia's mental health system and its interim report focusing on prevention and early intervention. COTA strongly believes that early intervention must refer to the early intervention of the onset of mental illness *at any stage of life*. The focus of the Productivity Commission to date appears to be predominantly (almost exclusively) on early intervention based on life stage or age, and thus on the early intervention of supports for young people. Whilst COTA supports this critical work to ensure young people remain well over the course of their life, we also argue for the importance of ensuring that older people do not miss out because of this ageist approach to early intervention, as has been the case for too many years.

Ageism is endemic in all areas of our health system, including mental health. For older people, this may manifest in mental health related symptoms being mis-diagnosed or described as age-related illnesses. (For example, depression is a mental illness at any age, and depression is not a natural part of ageing!) The mental health of older people is a challenging area, requiring specialist training and supports. COTA Australia urges the government to fully and equitably consider the mental health needs of older people in the development, funding and implementation of all mental health strategies.

⁴ See <https://www.cotasa.org.au/Programs/life/default.aspx>

⁵ See <https://www.cotatas.org.au/programs/peer-education/eat-to-cheat-ageing/>

Department of Health (Dental and Oral Health) Measures:

- That the Commonwealth increase its contribution towards the *National Partnership Agreement on Public Dental Services*, in order to reduce wait times for vulnerable cohorts such as older Australians and include performance benchmarks to provide support for people in Residential Aged Care Facilities. Such increased funding should include a requirement for state and territory contributions to remain at current levels or increase; the publication of annual wait times from point of registration; that a portion of funding be used to reduce waitlists using private dental services; and that a portion of funds be used to trial mobile dental services that deliver services to aged care facilities.

Department of Health (General Health and Mental Health) Measures:

- Design programs for 'older Australians aged 65 and over who are on low incomes' and 'older Australians living in Residential Aged Care Facilities' as two focus groups within the National Women's and National Men's Health Strategies.
- Increase preventative programs to support the health of older Australians - such as health literacy, and health promotion. Consider the use of peer education and health advocacy models.
- Develop greater coordination and integration in the health system with other care support systems, such as aged care, home care, and support from the community.
- Increase funding and support for Advanced Care Planning and Advanced Care Directives education.
- Fully and equitably consider the mental health needs of older people in the development, funding and implementation of all mental health strategies.

Department of Health (Aged Care)

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety has made clear that services for older people in Australia need a substantial overhaul. The historical piecemeal, ad hoc and cherry-picking approach to of review reform recommendations has been demonstrated at the Royal Commission to be ineffective and requiring significant change.

COTA believes there must be a comprehensive, accessible, transparent and equitable aged care system, focused on the individual and diverse needs of older people. Core pillars of the system must be the 'consumer experience' and the consumer's ability to exercise 'choice and control'.

Throughout 2020 COTA will articulate its vision for the future of aged care, both through the mechanism of the Royal Commission and in its general advocacy with Government about the ongoing recommendations from prior reviews and government decisions not yet implemented by Government.

Continuing to implement reforms currently underway

COTA believes that the Government can and should continue to implement reforms while the Royal Commission enquires about the future of Aged Care. This includes the full implementation of the recommendations of the Tune Review as well as the Carnell and Paterson Reviews along with the implementation of an integrated Care at Home program.

COTA was pleased to see that Government provided a firm commitment in its response to the Royal Commission's Interim Report 'Neglect' that it would continue to proceed with developing a unified care at home system, along with a single assessment workforce. This is critical work which should continue to be fully funded in the budget.

While COTA will have further to say prior to the budget in relation to transforming the aged care system, we note three particularly critical aspects of our COTA's *5 Urgent Fixes in Aged Care* that calls for the Government to:

- 1) **Ensure all older Australians no longer have to wait for home-based care more than 60 days⁶.**
This was estimated by the Department of Health to cost between \$2-\$2.5Billion dollars per year. COTA recognises the workforce implications of increasing care for more than 120,000 Australians will necessitate a 2-3 year window for such a plan to be implemented.
- 2) **Give more power to consumers by giving them control over their residential care funding, and remove the restraint of ACAR allocation of beds so providers can grow in response to consumer demand (and not be protected if they are not in demand).**
This decision was announced in principle in the 2018 Budget subject to an Impact Study to set out the steps needed to implement it. Government has dragged its feet on the Impact Study which was only completed this January. COTA welcomes the Completion of the Impact Study and government should now implement it without further delay.
- 3) **Fix the aged care workforce by increasing the numbers of aged care staff, especially personal care workers and allied health professionals; creating better career pathways; and changing the workforce culture to be consumer directed.**

COTA supports the implementation of most of the Aged Care Workforce Taskforce recommendations, in particular measures that improve number, quality and mix of aged care staff.

⁶ COTA originally proposed no longer than three months from making an appointment for an assessment, but Minister Colbeck has publicly articulated a goal of 60 days, so COTA obviously supports this shorter target. It a long way from a median 34 months for a Level 4 HCP.

Once again, however, between the aged care industry and government, little has been achieved since the Taskforce Report was delivered to government in June 2018. It's time for concerted action.

Ensuring funds are available to immediately implement Aged Care Royal Commission recommendations

While COTA recognises that some Royal Commission recommendations delivered in November 2020 may require costing and consideration for funding in the 2021 budget, several recommendations are likely to be able to commence before then. COTA would urge the Government to ensure it provisions billions of dollars in the 2020/21 financial year towards commencing the implementation of the Royal Commission recommendations.

COTA believes that an essential element of effective implementation of the Royal Commission's recommendations will be the co-designing of processes and policies with older Australians. During critical stages of implementation, the Government must facilitate direct engagement by older Australians, their families and friends who have lived experience of the aged care system.

Aged Care Navigation

The Aged Care System Navigators consortium, led by COTA Australia, is trialling a variety of navigation models in 64 locations across the country. The Royal Commission noted the significant need for the Aged Care Navigators yet reserved its view on what model of navigation would best suit the future of the aged care system.

The current funding for the Navigators trials will cease on 30 June 2020. COTA notes that the Royal Commission has mentioned in its Interim Report its intention to discuss the importance of Navigators as part of its final report. Further COTA notes the announcement that a change to aged care assessments will occur from April 2021 and that the Government implemented its budget commitment for \$10M over 4 years for CALD Aged Care Navigators as part of MYEFO 2019. We recognise that these important announcements may impact the future models of any Aged Care Navigator programs.

Should the Government elect not to roll out the trials to a full program until after the Royal Commission's final report, COTA Australia would urge the Government to continue the Trials for a minimum of a one-year period to ensure the expertise, skills and capacity built up within the trials are maintained.

Department of Health (Aged Care Measures):

- Allocate in the 2020-21 Budget funding provisions to support the implementation of the Royal Commission recommendations from December 2020.
- Provide funding for consumer consultation and input into the design and implementation of the future aged care system.
- Commit to a definite timetable and implementation plan to reach an additional \$2-\$2.5 billion funding per year for home-based care services to reduce wait times so that no consumer will need to wait more than 60 days within two years.
- Fund the transition of the existing Aged Care System Navigators pilots to a full program of Navigators available across the country.
- Announce and fund the implementation plan to place the funding of residential care into the hands of consumers and abolish the ACAR allocation system in accordance with the in principle decision of the government in 2018 and the recommendations of the Impact Study just completed.

Department of the Treasury

Retirement Incomes Review

On 27 September 2019, Federal Treasurer Josh Frydenberg announced a Retirement Incomes Review. COTA had long called for such a review to investigate how the different parts of Australia's retirement incomes system interacted with each other and how the system and its components can achieve more optimum outcomes in an equitable and sustainable way.

The Review Panel will provide its final report to the Government by 30 June 2020 to assist the Government in developing a fact base of information about retirement income policy and practice as they exist and operate today and the likely implications of them into the future.

COTA welcomes the establishment of this Review on the broad basis for which COTA (and others) advocated as we believe it will identify inequities in the system and lend credence to our proposition that Government will need to adjust some of the current policy settings for retirement incomes, either in the 2021/22 budget or during the next term of Government.

In preparation for such measures, we anticipate that Government will consult with stakeholders on the key findings of the Review, prior to making any changes to Australia's retirement income system. Two key groups who should be included in any consultations are older Australians already in retirement and mature age workers nearing and preparing for retire. We request therefore that funding should be allocated to conduct structured consultations with consumers in 2020/21 about the design of and impact of any potential policy changes to retirement income policies.

Independent Retirement Income Advice

COTA's 'State of the Older Nation' report⁷ surveyed older Australians (aged 50 and over). It identified that more than one in two (53%) of older people felt that the rising cost of living is leaving them behind (for those renting their homes this was 71%, and for those living with a disability 65%). One in five (20%) of older people surveyed indicated that they do not have any money to spend on leisure or social activities. Moreover, one in four of those surveyed felt insecure about their finances being able to meet their needs for the rest of their lives. A total of 12% advised they had overdue bills due to payment difficulties. Simply put, older Australians are struggling to keep up with the cost of living pressures.

COTA therefore believes there is a need to improve the adequacy, equity and sustainability of retirement incomes for the many older Australians on low and fixed incomes who are particularly affected by increased pressure on costs of living.

It is understandable that older Australians become frustrated when the retirement rules change unpredictably, which can impact on their living standards. This is particularly problematic when changes are retrospectively applied to consumers already in retirement who have little ability to adjust their finances which were based on the old rules.

An independent body is needed to provide greater confidence for those who have planned their retirement incomes. COTA proposes that while the Government (as the elected representatives) should continue to have the final say on all Government policies there is merit in considering a mechanism to provide arms-length and independent advice of any changes prior to Government finalising its decisions. This should include publicly available impact modelling of options and recommendation of appropriate transitional arrangements to protect older Australians already in retirement. Such a body should include representatives of older Australians and be tasked with providing a report once every 5 years on the state of retirement incomes.

⁷ <https://www.cota.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/COTA-State-of-the-Older-Nation-Report-2018-FINAL-Online.pdf>

Financial Literacy

The level of financial literacy required for older people to effectively manage their financial security has become greater in recent years. This is due to factors such as the growth in online financial services and reduction in face-to-face services; more people now having a more complex mix of age pension and superannuation; and the common poor standards of consumer engagement and service provision by financial services institutions.

The Australian superannuation system is one of the most sustainable in the world. However, it achieves this in part by placing much of the risks to retirement income adequacy (e.g. longevity risk, investment risk) on superannuants themselves. Government makes it compulsory for almost all to contribute to their superannuation but provides almost no support to people to understand the system and its opportunities and risks.

We are also now in an era of low growth and low investment return for traditional retirement investments held by individuals, such as term deposits. This adds to the pressures on many retirees living standards, and faces them with the dilemma of whether to put their savings in higher earning investments, such as equities and managed funds, when they have no experience with and knowledge about how you do this on a sound and lower risk basis.

Despite the significant allocation of funds by ASIC to Ecstra (formerly Financial Literacy Australia), there has been little action to address the significant and systemic gaps in the financial literacy of many older Australians.

A range of other challenges for many retirees include when a retiree's partner passes away and that partner handled the family finances; and lower income retirees tend to be vulnerable to financial scams and to forms of consumer credit (such as the use of Afterpay and similar instantly-approved loans, or worse still, pay day lenders) which see older people take on additional debt, without being sure of interest rates or other hidden fees and charges.

Financial literacy measures that we urge the Australian Government to consider include:

- Development of a program of support services and resources to assist older Australians understand, navigate, plan and manage finances in the current financial environment. Particular focus should be given to supports for older Australians more likely to be vulnerable to significant risk, whether due to low incomes and assets or lack of capacity to manage the risks of even modest investment decisions.
- Provide greater resources for the early identification of older people facing financial hardship or in significant need of support in planning and managing their finances.
- Consider the use of trained peer education models to support older Australians, with a focus on support for vulnerable people.

Combined, these measures would be important steps to assist more older Australians to manage their own finances and assets and prevent them from slipping into unnecessary poverty or debt.

Budget impact reports

From 1983-2013, the Federal Government released a Women's Budget Statement, analysing the impact of the annual budget on women and girls. This is in recognition that many aspects of budgetary reporting disproportionately affect women. Older women, for example, are likely to be most impacted by changes to housing and retirement income policy. This is due to historical structural and economic imbalances between genders, including the gender pay gap and division of labour. COTA Australia supports calls from a range of leading women's sector organisations, including the Women's Electoral Lobby, to reinstate gender budgeting in Australia.

In addition, COTA recognises the distorted discussions in the Australian public about the ‘cost’ of older pensioners and other welfare benefits. The Retirement Income Review’s discussion paper has indicated a significant portion of Government support for all ages is in the form of tax concessions and other benefits provided which flow into superannuation balances. The budget readily provides information on the amount of expenditure in that year on measures such as the ‘age pension’ but does not provide forecasts as part of the budget on the value of individual tax expenditure items (or otherwise known as taxation revenue foregone). Instead a tax expenditure statement is made at a time other than Budget or MYEFO articulating all the individual items where foregone taxation has been spent⁸. In these statements of revenue foregone, the concessional taxation of superannuation is second only to the principal residence exemptions in terms of the overall size of its contributions.

Transparency of all direct and indirect costs to revenue to produce public policy outcomes is an important tool for the public to understand how taxes are raised and used on their behalf. COTA proposes that the annual Budget papers identify both gross and net expected taxation revenue, articulating the anticipated revenue foregone due to a variety of current and budget policies included within the Budget.

Department of the Treasury Measures:

- Fund consumer consultations about any proposed policy changes to retirement income policies in light of the fact base established by and findings of the Retirement Income Review.
- A body independent of Government, that includes representatives of older Australians, should be established to provide advice and impact modelling to Government on proposed changes to retirement incomes and a report on retirement incomes once every 5 years.
- Fund financial literacy programs that educate older Australians (including those with low and modest incomes) on how to manage their finances in current financial environments. Consider use of peer education models.
- Introduce a budget impact report that includes a reinstated ‘Women’s Budget Statement’ and the gross and net expected taxation revenue for a range of different taxation policies.

⁸ See for example 2017 Tax Expenditures Statement available at: <https://treasury.gov.au/publication/2017-tax-expenditures-statement>

Department of Education, Skills and Employment

Mature Age Employment Measures

Many older Australians seek to remain in employment for longer periods for reasons such as needing the income, connection to colleagues and community, and skills development. COTA supports flexible Government measures that support and enable older Australians to continue to work in flexible work arrangements beyond the age they are eligible for the age pension. Indeed, many older Australians have rejected the notion of a fixed age 'retirement' opting instead for a change in their working habits, while continuing active employment.

Research from Deloitte Access Economics in 2015 found the flow-on effects of a longer work life can mean increased retirement savings, reduced welfare costs for future governments, greater social inclusion and improved health outcomes over time⁹. Yet age-related bias and unlawful discriminatory practices exist with up to 30% of employers reporting they are reluctant to hire workers over a certain age¹⁰. So, support and enablement of continued employment necessarily also means action to tackle barriers to employment such as ageism and age discrimination.

COTA welcomes measures that contribute to the financial security of older people in 'retirement' years. However, the benefits are not only to the individual, but given changing population demographics, are also beneficial to the broader economy. The 2016 Golden Age index by PwC found that if Australia's employment rate for workers aged 55 years plus (52%) was to increase to Swedish levels (74%), the potential gains to the Australian economy could be about \$69 billion¹¹. Of that, \$57 billion could be achieved by increasing employment participation for people aged 55 to 64.

As a major employer, the various departments of the Australian Government have the opportunity to demonstrate leadership in mature age employment. One-way leadership of doing so is annual publication of the percentage of Australians over 50 in the public service. This may include the percentages of successful applicants from outside the APS, current contractors and permanent members of the APS. Best practice would include a comparative metric for under 50-year-old of all items and the modelling of benchmark levels that each Department should reach on the number of older workers they should aspire to employ. To achieve such benchmarks, programs may need to be developed on better retention and recruitment strategies for older workers.

Restart Wage Subsidy

Programs such as *Restart Wage Subsidy* has been a positive step towards addressing underemployment and unemployment in Australians over the age of 50. However, many employees find that their employment has been discontinued after a relatively short employment period, once the initial boost from the subsidies lapse. COTA believes a variety of measures need to operate in tandem to make any significant impact, and we note that a number of initiatives are being trialled as part of *More Choices for a Longer Life*. In terms of financial incentives COTA believes an ongoing reduction of tax on small to medium businesses for each mature age employee may be a more sustainable policy that encourages retention of mature age employees for longer periods, and is worth trialling.

⁹ Deloitte Access Economics. 2015. *Increasing participation among older workers: The grey army advances*. Prepared for the Age Discrimination Commissioner, Australian Human Rights Commission.

¹⁰ Australian HR Institute. October 2018. *Employing Older Workers Research Report*. Prepared for the Australian Human Rights Commission.

¹¹ PwC, June 2016. *PwC Golden Age Index: How well are OECD economies harnessing the power of an older workforce?* Australian edition. Accessed at: <https://www.pwc.com.au/publications/assets/people-golden-age-index-jun16.pdf>

Skills Checkpoint

The Skills Checkpoint for Older Workers provides older workers with individually tailored assessments, referrals and advice on how to best use their existing skills in the workforce or identify opportunities for upskilling. COTA support the Skills Checkpoint, but note that transparency and effectiveness of the measure could be increased by:

- Reviewing and publishing the statistics of participants captured by the Skills Checkpoint for Older Workers online tool; and
- Integrating the Skills Checkpoint for Older Workers with the Better Ageing 45-year and 65 year online check-up to provide one portal for older Australians.

JobActive

JobActive contracts must better consider the needs of older workers and provide specific supports to them. Ageism and employment discrimination remain a major issue for many older Australians who are seeking to re-enter the workforce or secure employment after termination. JobActive providers must be equipped with the skills and knowledge to meet the workforce search needs of and issues facing older Australians. We hear too often of JobActive providers telling mature age unemployed people that they need to accept “that their age is against them” in terms of finding a job. This is unacceptable. Older Australians continually tell COTA that ageism is one of the biggest barriers they face in finding a job. Understanding the barrier of age discrimination, and assisting potential employers and employees to navigate this, requires specialist skills. To this end, COTA Australia recommends the development of specialist jobseeker agencies specifically skilled in the needs of older workers.

Department of Education, Skills and Employment Measures:

- Annually publish the proportion of successful applicants aged 50 and over accepted for employment (permanent and contract) in the Australian Public Service (APS) as compared to all applicants of the same age cohort (aged 50 and over) to the APS. For comparative purposes, publish the proportions of successful applicants aged 49 and under accepted for employment to the APS, in relation to all applicants of the same age cohort (49 and under).
- Model benchmark mature-age employee levels by all Australian Government Departments and trial approaches within the Australian Public Service to retain and employ mature age workers.
- Provide practical guidance to employers on mature age employment retention and attraction.
- Implement initiatives to reduce and ultimately prevent age-related bias and unlawful discriminatory practices towards older people in employment.
- Improve the Skills Checkpoint for Older Workers program by publishing the statistics of participant response to the online tool and integrate the program with the Better Ageing 45yo and 65yo check-ups.
- Increase skills development support for older people, including in the area of retraining.
- Develop specialist job seeker agencies specifically skilled in the needs of older unemployed people.
- Develop further initiatives to address the underemployment of older Australians in collaboration with older people, employer peaks and the COTA Federation.

Department of Social Services

Newstart Payment

Many older Australians find it very difficult to access employment due to barriers such as age discrimination. Around a quarter (24.6%) of Newstart recipients are over the age of 50 years. With the extremely low rate of Newstart allowance these older people find they have to draw on their savings or sell other assets to meet living costs. This is particularly the case for those older Australians who are renting their homes who can have significantly higher living costs.

As part of the Raise the Rate campaign, COTA strongly supports an increase in the Newstart allowance by at least \$75 per week, for all Newstart recipients, not just older Australians.

Changes must be extended to the future indexation and benchmarking of Newstart. While a range of options are available, we favour applying the same indexation to Newstart that is applied to the Age Pension.

Newstart - Abolish the Liquid Asset Waiting Period for older Australians

COTA proposes a review of the means testing for unemployed people over the age of 55, as we are concerned by the rate at which the Newstart allowance causes older Australians to reduce their income or assets prior to receiving financial support in seeking employment. Supporting older Australians on Newstart to retain their existing financial resources will reduce later pressures on the Age Pension.

There is currently legislation before the Parliament to extend the maximum waiting time of the Liquid Assets Waiting Period (LAWP) from 13 weeks to 26 weeks. Under the proposal, the maximum six-month waiting time will apply where a person's liquid assets reach \$18,000 for a single person with no dependent children, and \$36,000 for couples.

The LAWP disproportionately affects older Australians, especially where their intended retirement incomes are kept in non-superannuation products such as bonds and shares. Many people have a significant proportion of their savings intended to support retirement in other than superannuation (which is exempt from the Liquid Asset Test). COTA Australia unequivocally opposes this legislation. Indeed, COTA Australia supports the abolition of the LAWP altogether, in line with recommendations from a number of reports, including the Henry Tax Review¹². At the very least it should be abolished in this Budget for people over 55 years of age.

Commonwealth Rental Assistance

There has been a significant decline in housing affordability in recent years. This has made it very difficult for many older Australians who are renting their homes to make ends meet. Finding housing that is affordable, stable and accessible remains a challenge in the private rental market.

The current policy of increasing the Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) in line with changes to the Consumer Price Index resulted in an increase of 41% between 2003 and 2017. However, average rents over this same period increased by 64%¹³. This shortfall has led to significant housing stress amongst welfare recipients. According to Anglicare Australia's Rental Affordability Snapshot 2019

¹² Henry K, Harmer J, Piggott J, Ridout H, Smith G (2009). *Australia's future tax system: report to the treasurer*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia

¹³ Daley, J., Coates, B., Wiltshire, T., Emslie, O., Nolan, J. and Chen, T. (2018). *Money in retirement: More than enough*. Grattan Institute.

only 3% of rentals were affordable for a couple on the aged pension. Only 0.8% of private rental properties were affordable for a single person on the aged pension¹⁴.

This is an unacceptably small percentage of rental properties and in part is due to the fact the CRA has not kept pace with the changes in the rental market. COTA Australia proposes that future changes to the CRA should be linked to median rents in state and territories (or even local geographical areas) as well as the maximum CRA being immediately increased. The inadequacy of the CRA has been known at least since the Harmer Review of the pension system in 2008, but no remedial action has been taken.

Older women in particular are the fastest-growing part of the population at risk of homelessness. Indeed, older women had a 63% increase in accessing specialist homelessness services, most often related to domestic and family violence, divorce, workforce patterns, and financial insecurity¹⁵. There is an emerging gap in services specifically designed to meet the needs of older women experiencing domestic violence. However, for many, the risk of homelessness is primarily due to the poor availability of affordable housing. Increasing the CRA is likely to provide much needed relief for this cohort. Further to this, 2018 modelling also found that an increase would also be the greatest difference to the retirement incomes of older women¹⁶. Improved access to social or public housing would provide great benefit to older women at risk of homelessness.

To provide urgent relief, there is a strong need to increase the CRA. The Grattan Institute's report *Money in retirement: More than enough* recommended a boost in the maximum rate of CRA by 40% for singles¹⁷. COTA Australia supports this proposal. Such an increase must be in addition to, not instead of, the proposed increase in the base Newstart rate. COTA is also happy to consider measures that would better target the increased CRA on those most at risk, i.e. in the private rental market.

Older People with Disabilities

In 2018 there were 4.4 million Australians with a disability, of whom 1.8 million are over the age of 65 and constitute approximately 41% of all people with a disability¹⁸. People with disabilities experience various barriers that hinder their full participation in society, including in the areas of education, employment, housing, physical access and social participation. People with disabilities are also at greater risk of abuse, violence and neglect.

Older people may have a pre-existing disability (either lifelong or longer-term) or having acquired their disability later in life. For the latter group, COTA Australia is receiving increasing anecdotal consumer feedback that they are not receiving sufficient supports within the state disability and aged care systems when compared to the NDIS. That is to say, had they acquired their disability before NDIS eligibility age they would be entitled to greater supports. COTA Australia is increasingly concerned about the reported unmet needs of this cohort of older Australians.

National Disability Strategy

The National Disability Strategy 2010-2020 is due to be completed during this term of Government, and a new National Disability Strategy will take its place. The new strategy should be informed by recent and current consultations with people with disability, their families and carers, and consider

¹⁴Anglicare Australia (2019). Rental Affordability Snapshot: National Report.

¹⁵ Australian Human Rights Commission (2019). *Older Women's Risk of Homelessness: Background paper*:

¹⁶ Coates B. (2018). What's the best way to close the gender gap in retirement incomes? Grattan Institute Report. A

¹⁷ Daley, J., Coates, B., Wiltshire, T., Emslie, O., Nolan, J. and Chen, T. (2018). *Money in retirement: More than enough*. Grattan Institute.

¹⁸ ABS, 4430.0 Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2018.

the recommendations of the Productivity Commission Review of the National Disability Agreement¹⁹. It will also be the first NDS to be developed following the split of NDIS age eligibility for under 65 year olds and the continued support for older Australians with a disability from a mix of the aged care system and the residual state disability programs. It's important therefore that older Australians with a disability be a key cohort of people with a disability considered by the National Disability Strategy 2020 and beyond.

Access to Respite

COTA Australia echoes concerns raised by the disability sector peak bodies and organisations, as well as our own members and consumers, about the lack of timely and affordable respite care. Access to respite is an essential way to help carers to continue care by giving them time to attend to their own health and wellbeing. It can also prevent the physical, emotional and mental exhaustion associated with carer burnout. Measures must be put in place to ensure access to timely and affordable respite care. While such measures can be funded by the aged care system, the quantum required by carers of an older Australian with a disability may be greater.

Grandparents and out-of-home-care

We need a plan to support grandparents in their role as grandparent carers. Grandparent care is the fastest growing form of out-of-home care for children. Many provide care in an informal arrangement with no legal recognition of their caring role and thus without the financial assistance available to other foster carers. This places strain on their pensions or low incomes in order to meet the expenses of child-raising. COTA Australia support the investigation of options to assist grandparent carers, which may include:

- Data collection on grandparent carers.
- Tying the Family Tax Benefit to the family member with whom the child is resident, instead of the parent being the default, to ensure grandparents have access to income when they are in informal caring arrangements.
- An exemption from the activity requirements for Newstart for grandparent carers.
- An allowance for low-income grandparent carers to ease financial pressures.

NBN access and affordability

Staying connected online is important for many older Australians wanting to connect with family and friends or even conduct basic tasks like internet banking or connecting with Government services. However, the cost on internet services are out of the reach of many people low-income earners.

Modelling by the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) indicates that the cost of services may mean that approximately a million low income households are at risk of not switching over to NBN, many of whom are older people. COTA has identified a strong need for the implementation of an internet supplement for pensioners to reduce the cost of the NBN and ensure the most vulnerable don't miss out.

In 2019, the Telecommunications Consumer Safeguards Review offered 14 recommendations on the reliability of telecommunications services²⁰. Amongst these are the need for clear consumer information around service commitments from retailers, combined with transparency around pricing, performance and available options. COTA Australia urge these recommendations to be

¹⁹ See <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/disability-agreement/report/disability-agreement.pdf>

²⁰ See <https://www.communications.gov.au/what-we-do/internet/consumer-safeguards-review>

recommended in full. Further to this, the NBN wholesale Service Standards Inquiry draft decision suggests there is more to be done to safeguard consumer rights²¹.

Loneliness

The 2018 Australian Loneliness Report has indicated that loneliness increases the likelihood of experiencing depression by 15.2%, and the likelihood of experiencing social interaction anxiety by 13.8%²². In summary, loneliness breeds more loneliness and often leads to worse mental health issues. COTA Australia will continue to advocate for funding and support to address social isolation, both in the wider community and in residential aged care.

Department of Social Security measures:

- Raise the Rate of Newstart by increasing the maximum single rate of Newstart by \$75 per week,
- Remove the Liquid Asset Waiting Period for unemployed people over the age of 55 years. In the meantime, Government should remove legislation proposing to increase the waiting period from 13 weeks to 26 weeks currently before the Senate.
- Increase the maximum Commonwealth Rental Assistance (CRA) by 40% and benchmark future rises in the CRA to median rents. Review the structure of CRA to ensure that Commonwealth funds provide maximum assistance to the most vulnerable, generally in the private rental market.
- Make Australians with a disability over the age of 65 years a key demographic considered by the National Disability Strategy 2020 and beyond.
- Increase investment in social housing (public and community housing) and implement initiatives to increase the availability of affordable housing.
- Introduce an Internet Supplement for older Australians on low and modest income (refer to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Cities and Regional Development section).
- Provide more funding and support to address social isolation, both in the wider community and in residential aged care

²¹ See <https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/REDACTED%20Final%20-%20NBN%20Wholesale%20Service%20Standards%20Inquiry%20-%20Draft%20Decision%20-%20October%202019.PDF>

²² Michelle Lim, Australian Psychological Society (2018). Australian Loneliness report.

Attorney General's Department

Elder Abuse Prevention

The National Plan to Respond to the Abuse of Older Australians (2019-2023) aims to prevent and address issues of abuse against older Australians²³. COTA Australia has long advocated for a coordinated and effective approach to responding to, and preventing, elder abuse.

Whilst we support the measures described in the package, COTA Australia is concerned about implementation. Firstly, the document lacks full support from State and Territory Governments. Such support is critical to the success of the plan and must be forthcoming.

The plan features a National Hotline and frontline services as part of a four-year trial to support victims. The plan directs calls to report elder abuse through a National Hotline, but this was not accompanied by any additional resources for providers. Providers play a key role in delivering advocacy support and advice. This can only continue if the providers are sufficiently resourced to respond to calls to the Hotline. Otherwise people suffering abuse will have been encouraged to come forward but will not receive support.

Finally, the plan has gaps in reporting and transparency. The plan does not require any reporting until 2023. For there to be due accountability, six-monthly reporting is essential for the next three years, with annual reporting after that.

National Human Rights protection

Australia's human rights protections are thinly spread throughout a range of federal and state legislation. The result is a convoluted, contradictory and complex system that offers variable protections for rights. The current patchwork of human rights protections is not fit-for-purpose for translation to policy, law or the application of rights in a way that is meaningful to older people.

The distinctions of human rights protections between for example older Australians and Australians with a disability, have been particularly noted during the inquiries of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Safety and Quality. While the Commission concluded that "many people receiving aged care services have their basic human rights denied"²⁴, it also notes that it is the disability sector who has adopted a human rights approach to service delivery²⁵ and discusses how the rights of younger people with a disability may be in breach of their international human rights²⁶.

To better protect the rights and respect of the human rights of older Australians and in the absence of any comparable international instruments COTA Australia strongly supports improved domestic legislative human rights protections in the form of a national Charter of Human Rights, a Bill of Rights or a Human Rights Act. Such an instrument would require significant community consultation, which must be adequately funded and resourced.

Discrimination Law Reform

Age discrimination is rife. A national prevalence survey of age discrimination in the workplace indicated at least a 27% of the workers over 50 experienced age discrimination on at least one

²³ See <https://www.ag.gov.au/RightsAndProtections/protecting-the-rights-of-older-australians/Documents/National-plan-to-respond-to-the-abuse-of-older-australians-elder.pdf>

²⁴ Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, November 2019 'Interim Report: Neglect', p 12 Adelaide.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 194

²⁶ Ibid, p. 241

occasion in the workplace in the two years prior to the survey²⁷. As previously noted, a survey of employers shows that at least 30% discriminate against older job applicants.

Older Australians cite age discrimination as one of the biggest barriers to finding a job. Active employment in the years leading up to retirement is critical to generating financial security in retirement. We urgently need commitment to strengthen age discrimination law and its enforcement and introduce effective measures to confront and defeat discrimination.

In discussions with employers, many do not believe they have protection of the Age Discrimination Act when seeking to employ a person over the age of 50 years. This means that positions are rarely targeted for older employees, nor are employers encouraged to indicate where they would actively welcome mature age applicants. Despite the exemption contained within section 33(c) of the Age Discrimination Act it remains unclear to employers that they can include proactive statements in job advertisements such as “mature age candidates are encouraged to apply”.

Measures that could assist in addressing barriers to age discrimination include:

- Legislating compulsory reporting of mature age employment on the same basis as gender reporting.
- Strengthening the Age Discrimination Act by including provisions for action based on evidence-based data showing employers do not employ staff of certain ages.
- Amending section 33(c) of the Age Discrimination Act to make it clearer that employers may actively seek mature age applicants.
- Develop practical guidance to employers on mature age employment recruitment, retention and attraction.
- Implement other approaches within the Australian Public Service to encourage employment of older people.

Attorney General’s Department measures:

- Provide six monthly reporting on the progress of the National Elder Abuse Prevention Strategy For the next three years and annual reporting thereafter.
- Seek ways to strengthen the human rights protections of older Australians.
- Amend the Age Discrimination Act to ensure that employers are clear they may proactively seek to recruit mature age employees.
- Develop practical guidance to employers on mature age employment recruitment, retention and attraction.

²⁷ Australian Human Rights Commission. May 2016. Willing to Work: National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination Against Older Australians and Australians with Disability.

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Cities and Regional Development

Telecommunications Safeguards

In 2019, the Telecommunications Consumer Safeguards Review offered 14 recommendations on the reliability of telecommunications services²⁸. Amongst these are the need for clear consumer information around service commitments from retailers, combined with transparency around pricing, performance and available options. COTA Australia urge these recommendations to be recommended in full. Further to this, the NBN wholesale Service Standards Inquiry draft decision suggests there is more to be done to safeguard consumer rights²⁹.

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Cities and Regional Development measures:

- Implement the recommendations of the Telecommunications Consumer Safeguards Review.

²⁸ See <https://www.communications.gov.au/what-we-do/internet/consumer-safeguards-review>

²⁹ See <https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/REDACTED%20Final%20-%20NBN%20Wholesale%20Service%20Standards%20Inquiry%20-%20Draft%20Decision%20-%20October%202019.PDF>

Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources

Energy Affordability

Energy affordability continues to rate as concern for older people on low incomes, or with high energy needs related to medical or heating/cooling costs. COTA Australia is committed to ensuring that the changes to the energy market do not disproportionately disadvantage older people.

COTA has long advocated for nationally consistent energy concessions. Following input from COTA, the ACCC Retail Electricity Price Inquiry Report recommended changes to the concession schemes, to ensure a uniform, national approach³⁰. The recommendations suggested that concession schemes should be improved to ensure that, where possible, there is a uniform, national approach to electricity concessions. Concession schemes should:

- Be means tested to ensure that they are targeted at those most in need.
- Include a fixed dollar amount to offset daily supply charges and a percentage.
- Discount to offset variable usage charges.
- Only require consumers to reapply for concessions where this is necessary for the administration of the concession scheme.

To date, there has been no action to address these recommendations.

Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources measures:

- Implement the ACCC recommendations on energy concessions in a manner that delivers a uniform national approach to electricity concessions.

³⁰See

<https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Retail%20Electricity%20Pricing%20Inquiry%E2%80%94Final%20Report%20June%202018%20Exec%20summary.pdf>

Department of Foreign Affairs

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older People

There is no current international instrument dedicated to the rights of older people. The Human Rights Council 2013 consultation found that older people are insufficiently protected in existing human rights instruments, or in the practice of human rights bodies and mechanism. This is a significant gap in protecting the rights and dignity of older people.

COTA Australia has long argued that there needs to be a United Nations “Convention on the Rights of Older People” to provide a definitive, universal position that age discrimination is morally and legally unacceptable, and to provide legally binding protection with accompanying accountability mechanisms.

COTA Australia is concerned that in recent years Australia’s participation in the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing has been minimal. Given Australia’s history as a leading participant in the drafting of all international conventions since the inception of the United Nation, we are particularly disappointed at Australia’s disengagement with the preliminary processes of the Open-Ended Working Group.

Department of Foreign Affairs measures:

Elevate Australia’s engagement within the United Nations Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing to a point where Australia is seen as a regional leader on the need for an international mechanism on the rights of older people.