

# AGEING IN COUNTRY SOUTH AUSTRALIA

*COTA SA's 2025 Country Listening Posts*



**Version 1.0**

**July 2025**

This report was developed by COTA SA (Council on the Ageing South Australia) through its team at The Plug-in, research and engagement consultancy, who specialise in connecting with and understanding people aged 50+

**Acknowledgement of Country:** COTA SA acknowledges and respects Aboriginal people as the traditional custodians of the land of South Australia. We honour Aboriginal peoples' continuing connection to country and recognise that their sovereignty was never ceded. We pay our respects to First Nations Elders past, present and emerging and extend that respect to all Aboriginal people.

## **Thank You to Our Community**

### **To Older South Australians**

We extend our heartfelt thanks to all the older South Australians who participated in our listening posts. Your generosity in sharing your time, stories, and experiences with our team is invaluable. Your openness helps us better understand the issues that matter most to you and strengthens our advocacy on your behalf.

### **To Our Policy Council Volunteers**

A special thank you to our dedicated Policy Council volunteers who joined us at the listening posts. Your contributions and willingness to engage directly with community members add value to these important conversations.

### **To Our Local Partners**

We are deeply grateful to Care in Motion Community Care and Transport Inc and Fleurieu Neighbourhood Network for welcoming us into your communities and supporting us to reach older people in your regions. Your local insights and assistance make these listening posts possible.

## COTA SA - Here for older South Australians

COTA SA is an older people's movement and the peak body representing the rights, interests and futures of over 700,000 South Australians aged 50 years and over, who together make up more than a third of our population.

COTA SA reflects the diversity of modern ageing and connects with thousands of older people each year throughout South Australia. Our policy and advocacy are informed by our engagement with thousands of South Australians who share their experiences with us and is led by the COTA SA Policy Council, made up of older South Australians with diverse backgrounds, knowledge and experiences.

COTA SA's social enterprise, The Plug-in, conducts regular research with older South Australians. The research team works with organisations, researchers and service providers to understand the needs and experiences of older people to innovate and improve products, services and policies for the growing 50+ market.

COTA SA recognises our responsibility to advocate for a range of groups and ageing experiences. This includes engagement with South Australians 50+ from a wide range of communities including country South Australians, CALD, LGBTI+ and those with special areas of interest such as climate change.

In addition to our range of engagement, policy, and advocacy activities that ensure the voices of older people are influential, COTA SA offers services, programs, and information that connect with over 100,000 older South Australians each year, helping all South Australians age well.

COTA SA is a proud partner in the COTA National Alliance with independent COTAs in each state and territory along with COTA Australia.

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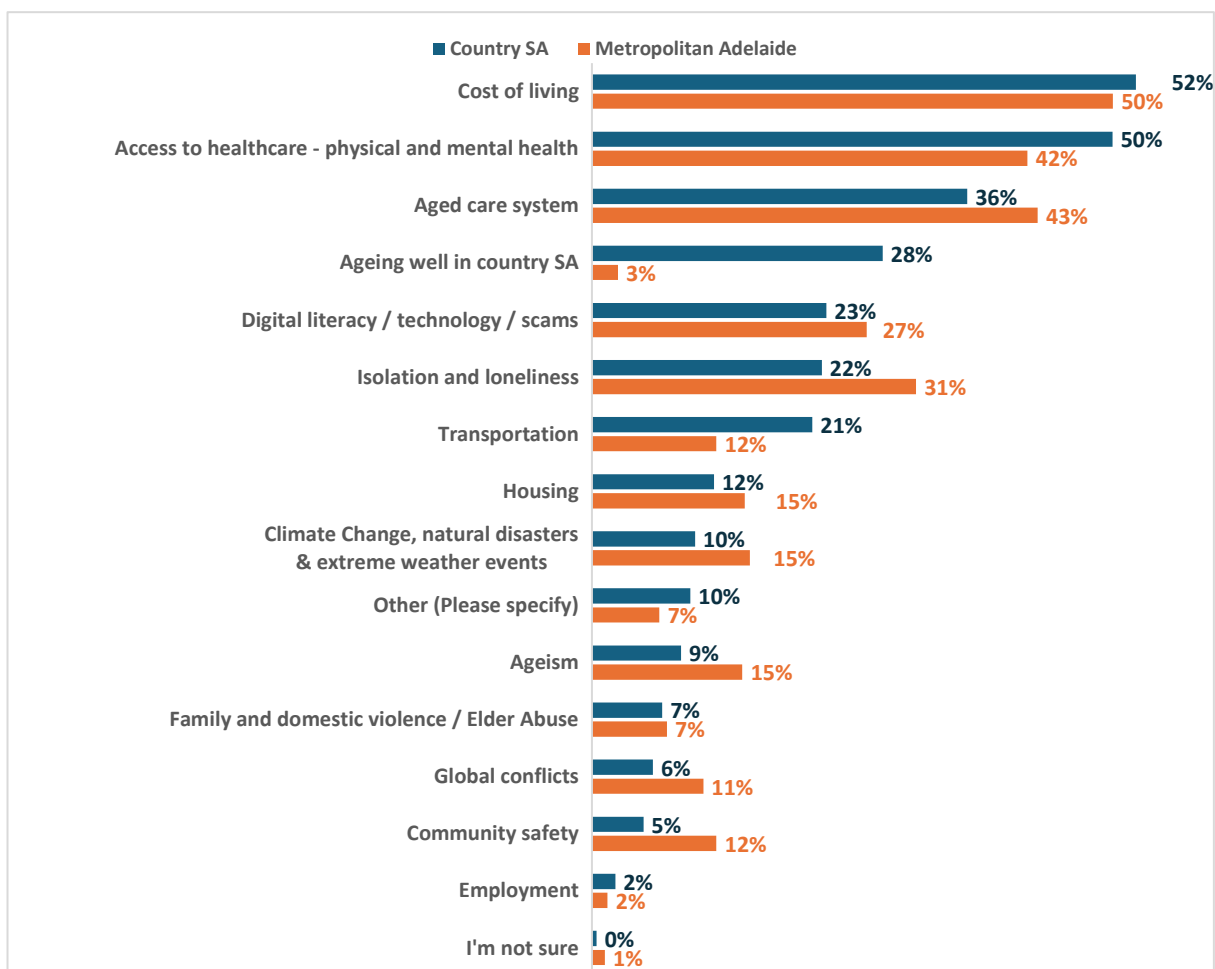
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# Snapshot of Ageing in country South Australia

COTA SA regularly engages with older people living in country SA. Through our ongoing 'How are you going' survey, we've heard from over 600 older South Australians, with over a third (35%) living in country SA. The responses to this survey provide us a snapshot of how older people in the country are experiencing life, what matters to them, and the challenges they're facing.

In the survey we ask community members to select three topics they felt are the most pressing for older people in South Australia today, with the three priorities of Cost-of-living, Access to health care and the Aged care system the most commonly selected. While these top three priorities were shared across the state, our data shows differences between people living in either country SA or metro Adelaide on several other topics. In particular, "Ageing well in country SA" and Transportation were more likely to be selected by people living in the country, highlighting the unique challenges faced outside metro areas.

***From the list below, please select the **THREE** topics that you feel are the most pressing for older people in South Australia today.***



Country SA n= 221, Metro Adelaide n= 400

These insights reflect the lived realities of older people in country SA, where distance, service availability, and community connection play a vital role in their experience of ageing. COTA SA's Country Listening Posts events sought to build upon our understanding of older people living in the country and the unique issues they face as well as what they love about where they live.



# Introduction

According to 2021 Census data, nearly 1 in 3 older South Australians call country South Australia their home. Importantly, country communities are ageing faster than those in metropolitan areas. This shift is reshaping country communities - affecting everything from health services and infrastructure to the way people connect and support one another.

In the Yorke Peninsula and the Fleurieu Peninsula particularly, people aged 50+ make up a significant portion of the community. The Fleurieu Peninsula has the oldest demographic profile in South Australia followed closely by the Yorke Peninsula. In some towns, such as Victor Harbor and Goolwa, more than 60% of the population is aged 50 or over, well above the state average of 29%<sup>1</sup>.

This reflects a broader trend: country South Australian communities tend to have older populations than metropolitan Adelaide. With this in mind, COTA SA set out to engage with older South Australians in their local communities, to have casual conversations at local shopping centres and main streets. *COTA SA's Country Listening Posts* tour took us to Yorke Peninsula and Fleurieu Peninsula inviting communities to respond to the question: *What is it like to grow older in country South Australia?*

Through *COTA SA's Country Listening Posts* sought to understand what matters most to older people living in country SA, and what helps or hinders people from ageing well in their community. The conversations we had were wide ranging from joy and connection to deep concerns about services, transport and affordability of life expenses.

## Five key themes emerged across both the Yorke and Fleurieu Peninsulas:

1. **The value in connection and community:** Many older residents described strong relationships with neighbours and a deep sense of belonging. People said they loved where they lived and felt supported, safe, and socially connected.
2. **Access to health care is a major barrier:** Health services were the most commonly raised issue. Concerns included long wait times, limited availability of local GPs and specialists, high staff turnover, and having to travel long distances, often without reliable or affordable transport for essential treatment.
3. **Limited transport options affect independence:** Transport issues were widespread and worrying. Older people shared the challenges of reaching appointments, visiting friends, or simply getting around town.
4. **The rising cost of living is squeezing budgets:** People spoke of growing financial pressure, especially on fixed or low incomes. Essentials like groceries, power, petrol, and health appointments were becoming harder to afford.
5. **The shift to digital is leaving some people behind:** As more services go online, older people reported feeling excluded or overwhelmed by technology. Some were confident using phones and the internet, but many asked for clearer, simpler support. There was also concern that in-person services were disappearing too quickly, leaving them with no real choice.

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<sup>1</sup> [2021 South Australia, Census All persons QuickStats | Australian Bureau of Statistics](#)

## About COTA SA's Country Listening Posts

*COTA SA's Country Listening Posts* were designed to hear directly from older people in country communities, in their own spaces, and on their own terms. These pop-up conversations were held in shopping centres across the **Yorke Peninsula** and **Fleurieu Peninsula** during March and April 2025, visiting Moonta, Kadina, Wallaroo, Yorketown, Goolwa and Victor Harbor. The Yorke and Fleurieu Peninsulas were prioritised as they include some of the state's oldest populations, see below table.

<i>Region</i>	<i>% of people aged 50+</i>
<i>Goolwa – Port Elliot</i>	64.3 %
<i>Moonta</i>	63.4 %
<i>Victor Harbor</i>	62.8 %
<i>Yorke Peninsula – South</i>	62.1 %
<i>Wallaroo</i>	59.2 %
<i>Yorke Peninsula – North</i>	59 %
<i>Kadina</i>	45.2 %

*Source: ABS, 2021 Census*

*COTA SA's Country Listening Posts* were casual conversations that were led by community members. To help guide our conversations and provide a consistent framework for our team, we asked community members five questions, in line with our statewide 'How are you going' survey:

1. What is one positive word to describe the experience of your current phase of life?
2. What do you look forward to most in life?
3. What is the biggest challenge affecting you right now?
4. What action would help make a difference to this challenge for you?
5. From the list below please pick three topics that you feel are the most pressing for older people in South Australia today:

Access to healthcare	Elder Abuse / FDSV
Ageism	Employment
Aged care system	Global conflicts
Ageing well in country SA	Housing
Climate Change	Isolation and loneliness
Community safety	Transportation
Cost of living	I am not sure
Digital literacy / Technology / Scams	Other (please specify)



## What older people in country South Australia told us about community connections: “we are like family”

Many of the people we spoke to told us how much they loved where they lived, and most were long-term residents of their communities. Across all the locations we visited, it was clear that strong community connections played a central role in why people felt so positive about where they lived.

Older people often spoke about the ability to connect with like-minded people and the comfort of knowing their neighbours. In Yorketown, one woman shared that her neighbours had become like family, always ready to help one another when needed.

We also heard a recurring theme about the shared values and mutual support found in country communities. One couple expressed how much they appreciated knowing that help was always available, and that there was a strong culture of looking out for each other.

When asked what they looked forward to most in life, people from these communities highlighted themes such as:

- Socially connecting with family and friends
- Participating in hobbies and community activities
- Travelling and going on holidays
- Maintaining good health
- Enjoying the local landscape and natural surroundings

These reflections paint a clear picture: for many older people in country SA, community, connection, and quality of life go hand-in-hand.

**We asked community members what they most look forward to in life, this is what they told us:**

*“Continuing to have good health, able to drive, walking on the beach, socialising.”- Listening Post Participant*

*“Goolwa is paradise.” - Listening Post Participant*

*“Another day with friends and my dogs” - Listening Post Participant*

*“Life is good. No problems at 91 years old for both myself and my wife. Lived in Goolwa for 35 years.”  
- Listening Post Participant*

## Limited access to healthcare impacts people's ability to age well

*"If transported to a hospital in Adelaide by helicopter or plane, but have no way to get home once released from hospital." – Listening Post Participant*

Access to healthcare was one of the most consistently raised issues throughout our engagement. For many older South Australians living in country areas, getting the care they need is not straightforward - and in some cases, it's not possible at all.

This challenge was particularly evident during our Yorke Peninsula locations, where healthcare and access to healthcare was the most discussed topic. One woman shared that her husband has cancer, but Yorketown lacks the medical resources he needs. As a result, they are now considering moving to Adelaide; something she deeply wishes to avoid but feels may be the only option to ensure he receives appropriate care.

Another recurring concern was the inability to build long-term relationships with local doctors. The frequent turnover of locum GPs means that many people never see the same doctor twice. One woman from Yorketown explained that each time she visits the clinic, she's faced with a new doctor forcing her to repeat her medical history and start building the relationship from scratch.

In the Fleurieu Peninsula, concerns about healthcare were closely tied to transport. Many people shared the stress of trying to get to and from appointments especially when eligibility criteria for transport assistance (like the Patient Assistance Transport Scheme, or PATS) were not met. Several people expressed anxiety about missing the one daily return bus to Adelaide, particularly if their appointments run late.

One community member in the Fleurieu shared their struggle with attending medical appointments in Adelaide. Their transport to Flinders Medical Centre cost up to \$380, including a \$180 fare and an additional \$200 for a carer, due to the assumption that aged care providers would handle transport. This meant they were no longer eligible for programs like Medi-Ride. In some cases, the lack of transport options leaves people without safe or reliable ways to attend hospital stays or specialist care. One person described how her neighbour, a woman in her 70s living alone, had no way to get to Flinders Medical Centre for a scheduled 2-day surgery. Because it wasn't considered an emergency, ambulance transport wasn't available. She was left to rely on a friend and this story was echoed by many other single seniors in her Retirement Village, all without local family or formal transport support.

The lack of flexible, accessible transport and the difficulty qualifying for PATS leaves many older people anxious, isolated, and unsure how to manage their health needs especially when they could no longer drive.

COTA SA has been advocating for the state government to extend the Patient Assistance Transport Scheme (PATS) fuel subsidy to Fleurieu Peninsula, incorporating Victor Harbor and Goolwa, a request that was unfortunately not included in South Australia's 2025/26 State Budget announcement.

[CLICK HERE TO READ OUR STATE BUDGET SUBMISSION TO FIND OUT MORE](#)

## Getting around is a challenge, even for short trips in the community

*“... transport to Flinders is emerging as an issue. Have own car so short distances are OK.” - Listening Post Participant*

Access to reliable and affordable transport is a well-known challenge in country South Australia. While this issue was raised in both the Yorke Peninsula and the Fleurieu Peninsula, it was a particularly strong theme in the Fleurieu.

Transport concerns often centred on getting to and from health appointments but also extended to everyday mobility within local communities. For example, one person described the complexity of trying to visit a friend who lives only one town over. To travel from an aged care facility in Encounter Bay to Goolwa requires a taxi to the town centre, followed by a bus, and then another taxi at the other end. They suggested a more practical solution would be a local bus loop that stops at aged care facilities in both locations.

There was also a clear underlying anxiety about the future, especially among those still able to drive. While many said they were managing fine for now, they worried about the day they'd have to stop driving and what losing that independence might mean. One man spoke about how his wife recently gave up driving due to a lack of confidence. He now drives them both but expressed concern about how they'd cope if he could no longer drive either.

## Cost-of-living is an ongoing concern in country SA

*“When we get a rise in our pension say like \$20 everybody wants the whole of it in increase prices and services so you end up being \$100 behind again.” - Listening Post Participant*

The rising cost of living is a constant theme in our engagement with older South Australians. It was raised in most conversations with people sharing their concerns about the increasing price of groceries, energy bills, and other essential services.

For many, financial pressures are felt most when trying to access healthcare or transport, especially in areas where bulk billing is unavailable. Several people told us they struggle to afford GP visits, even when they know the appointment is necessary. Cost becomes a barrier not just to wellbeing, but to staying socially connected and mobile.

There were also comments about how even small increases to the age pension are quickly absorbed by rising prices - often leaving older people worse off than before.

People also spoke about feeling trapped in their financial decisions, such as keeping private health insurance out of fear of losing benefits or being unable to afford alternatives if they give it up. Others shared how the cost of essential mobility aids like scooters felt out of reach, even though they are preparing to give up driving.

## The digital divide is leaving some older people behind

According to the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII), country areas score significantly lower than metropolitan ones, and older people remain among one of the most digitally excluded groups in the country<sup>2</sup>. Without action, this gap will continue to limit access to essential services like telehealth, online banking, and government information, as well as connections with family, community, and social life.

From our conversations in the Fleurieu and Yorke Peninsula, digital literacy emerged as a concern across both regions. While some participants expressed frustration with the complexity of new technology, others were more focused on the lack of choice. They described feeling forced into the digital world, especially as services go online and in-person options like face-to-face support or local bank branches continue to close.

In the Yorke Peninsula, several people shared that they either knew someone or were themselves someone who preferred living offline and felt that the shift to digital platforms left them behind.

Others expressed they lacked the confidence and support to complete tasks online. One participant suggested that a straightforward, practical guide could help bridge the gap: *"I would like a sensible, simple-as-possible handbook to help me use it [mobile phone]."* - Listening Post Participant

These conversations show that while digital access is part of modern life, it cannot come at the expense of inclusion, choice, and support especially for older people who value offline ways of engaging with the world.

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<sup>2</sup> [SACOSS, Digital Inclusion in Country SA](#)

## Next Steps

At COTA SA, our commitment to understanding the needs and aspirations of older people living in country South Australia remains a priority. We recognise that ageing well in country communities requires ongoing engagement to understand the changing needs of these communities.

We will continue to prioritise engagement through The *COTA SA Country Listening Posts*, which has proven to be a valuable avenue for meaningful conversations with older South Australians. These engagement activities not only help us identify the lived realities of ageing in rural and country areas, but they also shape our advocacy and inform local and statewide planning. Our aim is to embed these conversations as an ongoing cycle of consultation, reflection, and action – ensuring older people in country South Australia are not just heard, but that their voices influence policies and programs.

We look forward to continuing our journey with communities across country SA and supporting every person's right to age well wherever they live.



## COTA SA Related Reports

Want to read more about how we're working to amplify the voices of older people across regional South Australia? Dive into our reports below to explore our ongoing engagement, research, and advocacy efforts that aim to create stronger, more age-friendly regional communities.

### Relevant COTA SA Reports

[COTA SA's 2025-2026 State Budget Submission, February 2025](#)

[COTA SA, Ageing in Country South Australia, 2021 Listening Posts Report, December 2021](#)

[COTA SA, Ageing in Country South Australia, 2020 Listening Posts Report, March 2020](#)

[The Plug-in Research Project, Guiding Principles for Creating Meaningful Social Connections, April 2023](#)

[The Plug-in Research Project, Understanding Water Use and Needs of Older People In Regional South Australia, October 2023](#)

[The Plug-in Research Project, Transport Options Project, June 2020](#)

### Relevant COTA SA submissions

[COTA SA, Submission to the Public Transport Strategy Regional Review, June 2025](#)

[COTA SA, Submission to the Murray Mallee Regional Plan, May 2025](#)

[COTA SA, Submission to the Limestone Coast Regional Plan, May 2025](#)

[COTA SA, Submission to the Eyre and Western Regional Plan, May 2025](#)

[COTA SA, Submission to the Far North Regional Plan, May 2025](#)

[COTA SA, Submission to the Yorke Peninsula and Mid North Regional Plan, April 2025](#)

[COTA SA, Submission to the 30 Year Transport Strategy Overview, December 2024](#)

[COTA SA, Submission to the Greater Adelaide Regional Plan Discussion Paper, November 2024](#)

[COTA SA, Submission to the Community Consultation – mount barker community plan 2024 – 2044, June 2024](#)

To visit our suite of submissions you can click the link here: [Submissions • COTA SA](#)

## Want to keep up to date with more engagement like this?

At COTA SA, we are always connecting with older South Australians – listening, learning and making sure their voices are elevated.

### **Want to stay in the loop?**

If you are interested in receiving updates, news, and stories like this find out more about becoming a COTA SA member here: [Membership • COTA SA](#)

### **Want to get involved?**

If you would like to have opportunities to participate in research and engagement activities, find out more about joining The Plug-in here: [The Plug-in • COTA SA](#)

## Photo Gallery









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