

SUBMISSION TO THE

Draft SA Health Climate Change Framework

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[COTA SA](#) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission commenting on the Draft SA Health Climate Change Framework.

COTA SA is an older people's movement run by, for and with, diverse older people. We represent the rights, interests and futures of around 700,000 (39%) older South Australians. We

engage widely with older South Australians across the state, in person, via phone and email. The lived experiences of this diverse community shape and inform COTA SA's policy and advocacy work, including through our Policy Council, Regional Advisory Groups, LGBTI+ Rainbow Hub and Climate Change Group. COTA SA's social enterprise The Plug-in, is a specialist market insights operation that gives older people an influential voice to help industry, innovators and researchers better meet the future needs of the growing 50+ market.

COTA SA and Climate Change

COTA SA takes the threat of climate change seriously and our passionate Climate Change Group is focused on the actions that can be taken at a policy, organisational and personal level that tackle climate change. COTA SA's surveys show that the many older South Australians have a real desire to contribute to the prevention of, and adaptation to, climate change.

The adverse effect of climate change on the health of the community is evident in the rising cost of energy, heat and cold-related ill health and extreme weather events. The impacts of climate change are disproportionately felt by those on low and fixed incomes and vulnerable community members, including a substantial proportion of older people, as they will have the least capacity to mitigate climate change and adapt to extreme weather conditions.

We have responded to Government regarding various climate change concerns – including submissions on the draft Climate Change and Greenhouse Emissions Reduction (Miscellaneous) Amendment Bill 2024, and on the draft Greater Adelaide Regional Plan and its intention to prioritise climate change mitigation and adaptation in the final Plan¹. Our activities in relation to advocacy on this topic are described in more detail in our Statement of Interest in Climate Change².

Effect of Extreme Weather on Older People

A major concern of COTA SA is the effect of extreme weather on older people. A 2022 study examined the effect of the thermal environment of housing on the health of older people in

¹ <https://cotasa.org.au/about-us/latest-news/submission-to-the-greater-adelaide-regional-plan-discussion-paper>

² <https://cotasa.org.au/advocacy-policy-engagement/climate-change>

South Australia spelt out the implications of extreme weather: “older people are generally over-represented in morbidity and mortality statistics during hot and cold spells, particularly as chronic medical conditions associated with aging can often increase vulnerability”.³

The effect of **extreme heat** on older age groups is significant. SA Health published, several years ago, a report on this topic detailing the impact of a heatwave in Adelaide⁴ on older citizens. The document noted: *The burden of morbidity was particularly high in the older age groups. In the 75 and over age group, heat-related admissions to hospitals and emergency units were extremely high (up to 18 times higher compared to non-heat wave days during summer). This agrees with worldwide evidence from heat wave impacts and can be explained by physiological and cognitive contributing factors associated with the older age group.*

The figure of **18 times** higher is astonishing and underlines the importance of shade, affordable access to cooling and the role of tree canopy in helping suburbs cope with extreme heat.

COTA SA is also concerned about the effect of **ongoing cold** temperature on older people. Recent Australian research has questioned our assumptions about the effect of cold homes on community health. The results “suggest that the problem of unhealthy cold homes is likely to be significantly more prevalent than previously estimated. Far from affecting 5% of Australian households, the affected population may be 10 times this value.⁵ Climate change is likely to bring drier weather in winter as well as summer, thus exacerbating the low temperature normally expected at that time. Increasingly, many older people cannot afford to pay for adequate heating in winter, adversely affecting their health and contributing to the number of presentations to hospitals in winter months.

The previously-mentioned study on the relationship between the thermal environment of housing and health of older people in South Australia is clear on the effect of cold weather on

³ <https://www.mdpi.com/2073-4433/13/1/96>

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<https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/c67cf100436d8e7082a2dfc9302c1003/Adaptive+capabilities+in+elderly+people+during+extreme+heat+events+in+SA+-+Public+Health+Service+-+scientific+services+20140328.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=ROOTWORKSPACE-c67cf100436d8e7082a2dfc9302c1003-nKkgCmQ>

⁵ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2214629623001846>

older people. It states that “Surprisingly, in South Australia, death rates for hypothermia are comparable to those of Sweden” and attributes this to the inadequacies of South Australia’s housing stock in which our older people live.

We note that other SA government agencies and local councils can contribute to improving the energy and thermal efficiency of our state’s housing stock – whether in private home ownership, private rental, or rented through social and community housing. Improvements in those areas have been shown to reduce living costs and improve comfort levels for occupants, particularly in conditions of extreme heat and cold.

Research has shown that older people 60+ spend approximately 75-80% of their time inside their own home. The rising cost of energy is increasingly making it unaffordable for South Australians to inhabit homes which meet their thermal comfort needs.^{6,7} Heat and cold-related ill health from extreme weather illustrates the adverse effect of climate change on the health of the most vulnerable in our community. COTA SA’s State Budget Submission 2024-25 also highlights the key role that adequate supply of suitable housing plays for older people.⁸

ISSUES

COTA SA congratulates SA Health on the development of the draft SA Health Climate Change Framework, illustrating the SA Government’s intention to develop a climate-resilient health system. This is vital for the wellbeing of all South Australians, particularly the older and younger members of the community.

We support the broad aims of the proposed Framework, noting that the Framework is primarily focused on SA Health, the various agencies falling within its scope (as outlined on page 5), and the broader health sector. The Framework’s Vision Statement asserts that it “empowers the community to take necessary actions to protect their health”.

⁶ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/national-social-housing-survey-2018-key-results/contents/summary>

⁷ <https://health.adelaide.edu.au/adelaide-exposure-science-health/ua/media/43/thermal-comfort-guidelines.pdf>

⁸ <https://cotasa.org.au/assets/volumes/downloads/Submissions/COTA1470-State-Budget-Submission-2024-final.pdf>

In our submission, we have three suggestions to strengthen the draft Framework: Partnerships, Community Engagement, and Mental Health.

Partnerships

The Framework refers to *partners* and *partnerships* several times – particularly under *Leadership and Governance* on pages 11 and 12. COTA SA strongly endorses the importance of empowering the community by working through partnerships to achieve complex goals. COTA SA suggests that, in combatting climate change, the importance of partnerships with groups outside the health sector is critical and can be illustrated by the [Cool Refuges Trial](#). Campbelltown Council (part of the [Resilient East](#) group of councils) operated several Cool Refuges during a period of intense heat in March 2024, after observing the high level of demand of its citizens for air-conditioned Council facilities during recent heatwaves.

The use of these refuges in Campbelltown (Community Centres and library facilities with appropriate staff support, plus transport and water etc.) was significant and was detailed in a recent well-attended webinar run by Campbelltown Council⁹. We understand that other Councils have taken note of the success of this trial on the well-being of the Campbelltown community. A series of Warm Refuges in cold conditions would also be an extremely valuable project.

Projects along these lines complement SA Health’s developing response to the challenges of climate change and could potentially reduce some demand on facilities and services. Their further development should be encouraged.

COTA SA suggests that the topic of Partnerships should be made one of the Priority Action Areas, highlighting not only their importance in climate change adaptation and mitigation but their value in building community.

⁹ https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/component-page?action=viewdetailpage&sharelevel=meeting&useWhichPasswd=meeting&clusterId=us02&componentName=need-password&meetingId=XisGXNZ27heKReEMS6W-Se7SUOBIMOfWHq0UJb0N8c6uAilVrAL5L7m4MY7tQEC.EQVbcYY3ya39fODk&originRequestUrl=https%3A%2F%2Fus02web.zoom.us%2Frec%2Fshare%2FpvhydJJVZqGKDpb1gzb24MQmqhx7DhMw28JhKkYBERvgNUSrh1ySGIHSInRxy4s.ai8r4A-0cqiSTC_U%3FstartTime%3D1712116057000. Passcode:nd92f=3+

Community Engagement

COTA SA regularly seeks feedback from older South Australians about topics of concern and participates in national tracking studies on these topics as part of the COTA Federation. Climate change invariably is one of the top issues for older people, not only for seniors personally, but in relation to their concerns for their children and grandchildren into the future.

We acknowledge the importance of individual personal responsibility to adapt to and, when and where possible, mitigate impact on the climate. We appreciate that SA Health cannot alone keep the whole community safe in the face of rapid climate change. Nor can any other individual government agency, with or without partners.

Our community is actively seeking the tools to address climate change. Experience demonstrates that diverse, across-the-board community empowerment requires well-supported, long-lived community engagement. This includes education. Examples of good practice include in summer, promotion of the importance of hydration and in winter, distributing tips showing low-cost means of warming oneself. SA Health might consider their funding for climate related health promotion budgets to ensure these messages are rolled out alongside other important messages, in a coordinated SA Government approach. Plus, continuing the high value strategy of encouraging South Australians to look out for their neighbours – all neighbours, irrespective of age - during times of extreme weather.

We further acknowledge that effective engagement makes the most of existing community communication channels, such as those hosted by peak bodies and interest groups, including COTA SA. We encourage involvement of community groups who can represent, and are in regular contact with, CALD communities and other vulnerable populations.

We would recommend that the SA Government introduces a series of new grants to facilitate and encourage projects that have the potential to make a positive health and climate impact. Failing that, SA Health could, like COTA SA, take a climate in all approach and incorporate the need to address environment and climate change in all its activities including grants. This approach has been successfully used in other sectors, for example OfAW already administers

ageing well impact grants and this could be something similar. Allocation of grant funding, and associated publicity before and after grant-funded programs, would provide a forum for the Government to highlight progress against its Climate Emergency declared two years ago.

COTA SA suggests that the topic of Community Engagement be made one of the Priority Action Areas – to highlight its importance in sharing the Climate Change task and the need for it to be pursued over many years.

Mental Health

The mental health impact of extreme weather events – over which the individual has little, if any, control – has been recognised¹⁰. A State Government community engagement program would support individuals to feel as empowered as possible before and during extreme weather events. This includes heat and cold weather events, as well as natural disasters such as bushfires and floods, which are becoming increasingly common due to the impacts of climate change.

COTA SA's concern is that the incidence of mental health problems is much more likely to increase, rather than decrease, as the negative effects of climate change accumulate. Increasingly, feelings of hopelessness and fear, triggered by extreme weather events, will affect all age groups. It is critical that SA Health plan now for an increase in community mental health issues to A) prevent existing facilities and services being overwhelmed and B) develop new services.

Furthermore, social isolation or detachment from communities in the event of evacuation and the lessons learnt during COVID about why this is important and how to put better supports in place, including across CALD, LGBTI+ and other vulnerable groups of older people who may not normally/easily engage with government. COTA SA has developed expertise and understanding in this area having undertaken a statewide research project to understand what contributes to resilient individuals and communities navigating change, including natural disasters. Our

¹⁰ [Survey results: National study of the impact of climate-fuelled disasters on the mental health of Australians | Climate Council](#)

Navigating Change Project, carried out in conjunction with OfAW, done by The Plug-in led to a matrix of actions to be taken at individual community and government/organisational level.¹¹

COTA SA suggests that the topic of Mental Health be considered as one of the Priority Action Areas given its potential to overwhelm existing health services, which are already stretched.

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.

¹¹ [The Plug-in - Navigating Change Project Outcomes \(youtube.com\)](#)