COTA SOUTH AUSTRALIA
For older Australians

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COTA SA Submission to the Draft South Australian Public Health Plan

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Acknowledgement of Country

COTA SA acknowledges and respects Aboriginal people as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters of South Australia. We honour Aboriginal peoples' continuing connection to Country and recognise that their sovereignty was never ceded. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal people.

Introduction

COTA SA valued being part of the consultation process that preceded this draft, and we welcome the opportunity to provide feedback

As the peak body representing the rights, interests and futures of South Australians aged 50+, COTA SA supports a whole-of-life approach to public health — one that recognises the diversity and value of older people, and the significant demographic shifts shaping the future of health planning.

We commend the Plan's emphasis on prevention, equity and collaboration. These principles closely align with COTA SA's values and offer a solid foundation for sustained improvements in community wellbeing.

In responding to the draft Plan, we offer strategic commentary on key priorities that we believe will strengthen its impact and relevance — particularly as South Australia prepares for the realities of a rapidly ageing population. Our feedback draws on the lived experiences of older people, insights from our policy engagement, and established best practice in ageing and public health.

COTA SA welcomes the emphasis on co-design with people with lived experience and their communities, noting that older people are a significant and growing demographic in South Australia,

but that ageing is not homogenous. LGBTI+, CALD, First Nations and regional older people all experience interactions with the health systems in different ways, and these perspectives need to be acknowledged. One valuable source may be the findings from a new report from the Rainbow Hub SA, a community-led incorporated organisation providing a voice for older LGBTI+ people in South Australia over 50). The Rainbow Dog Project Report, explored the relationship between sudden ill health or a life changing event and mental health, which made specific recommendations, informed by co-design.

Commentary and Recommendations

1. South Australian Action on Brain Health

COTA SA strongly supports the Plan's inclusion of brain health and dementia as key public health concerns. Dementia is now a leading cause of death in Australia and represents a health and economic challenge, not to mention the social impacts of the condition.

COTA SA has identified the need for statewide action on brain health and dementia, and we are encouraged to see that the State Public Health Plan makes headway in an area.

South Australians are living longer than ever before, making action on brain health essential to improving quality of life, reducing health system pressures, and supporting ageing communities. Dementia affects around 35,000 South Australians—a number projected to increase by nearly 60% by 2054. It is estimated that more than 433,000 Australians currently live with dementia, and 1.7 million people provide unpaid care. As the oldest mainland state, South Australia faces an urgent need for a coordinated, whole-of-government response, similar in style to the SA Autism Strategy.

The National Dementia Action Plan 2024–2034 provides a national framework, but South Australia requires a state-specific, pragmatic approach that brings together health, aged care, local government, research institutions, and community organisations. COTA SA is calling for a **South Australian Action on Brain Health** to drive prevention, improve care pathways, and build dementia-capable communities.

Why Action Is Urgent

- Dementia care already costs $3.7 billion nationally, with people with dementia spending five times longer in hospital.
- One-third of South Australian hospital patients stranded awaiting aged care require Memory Support Unit placement.
- Up to 45% of dementia cases can be delayed or are preventable, and research shows that even a 5% reduction in future incidence could generate $120 billion in national savings by 2056[1].
- Families increasingly describe fragmented or inadequate support, highlighting the need for clear system coordination and accessible, community-based services.

[1] The-economic-cost-of-dementia-in-Australia-2016-to-2056.pdf

Key Focus Areas for a Statewide Approach

1. Workforce Development: Upskill hospital, primary care, ambulance, and aged care staff in best-practice dementia care. Dementia must become "business as usual" across the health and aged care workforce. SA should advocate nationally for mandatory dementia training in all health curricula.

2. Prevention and Brain Health Promotion: Embed brain health messaging into the State Public Health Plan and community wellbeing programs. Support South Australians to reduce dementia risk through lifestyle programs, education, and early intervention.

3. Research and Local Innovation: Strengthen collaboration with SAHMRI, the Registry of Senior Australians (ROSA), and the Caring Futures Institute. Pilot innovative care models and apply high-quality data to improve planning, service integration, and outcomes.

4. Carer Recognition and Support: Provide pathways for practical support, including respite, financial assistance, education, and programs that recognise and sustain carers' vital contributions.

5. Dementia-Friendly Communities: Deliver a statewide awareness campaign to reduce stigma and build dementia-inclusive environments across health, housing, transport, justice, and community sectors.

Role of COTA SA

As the peak body representing 700,000 older South Australians, COTA SA is ready to partner with Government to lead community engagement, co-design, sector collaboration, and communication. With strong relationships across the community and aged care sectors, COTA SA brings trusted, independent expertise and a deep understanding of older people's experiences.

Recommendation:
That the Plan embrace a **South Australian Action on Brain Health**, which will elevate brain health and dementia supports as a key strategic priority within the state's public health framework .

2. Navigation, Health Literacy and Digital Equity

The Plan notes individual lifestyle factors as a key determinant of health outcomes. However, for many older South Australians *navigation of support systems that can assist them* can be a significant barrier to making the best decisions for their health and wellbeing.

People managing complex or changing health conditions often face difficulty understanding what services and supports exist, how to access them, and what pathways they are eligible for. The shift to digital platforms — including appointment booking, telehealth and information access — has further entrenched inequity for people with limited digital confidence or connectivity.

From a public health perspective, navigation is not ancillary — it is central. Supporting people to find, understand and engage with the right health and social supports must be part of any strategy that aims to prevent deterioration or delay institutional care.

Noting that the needs and experiences of older people are far from homogenous, COTA SA recommends an ageing lens be applied to all program design, including for LGBTI+, CALD, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and disability.

Recommendations:
That the Plan elevate navigation and digital inclusion as critical enablers of health equity, particularly for older people and those with lower digital literacy.

That the Plan consider older people as a population group within priority populations, acknowledging the complexities of intersectionality.

3. Falls Prevention and Functional Independence

The Plan notes that falls are a leading cause of death and hospitalisation from injury, and that the impact from these events reaches well beyond simply physical. For older people, falls can be life changing, and a major contributor to avoidable functional decline. Their impact is not only clinical – and not just injury – but social and financial — affecting independence, mobility and access to community.

We know that pre-frailty levels are increasing, and COTA SA sees the importance of preventive action in this area, just as chronic disease is approached.

COTA SA notes though, that often falls and frailty are treated as inevitable trajectories for people as they age. This is not the case, and programs like COTA SA's *Strength for Life* suite of offerings, offer proven, scalable, preventive benefits — including frailty prevention and reablement following a fall. They also increase confidence, and improve wellbeing.

COTA SA welcomes the inclusion of falls in the Plan. However, we encourage a broader treatment of the issue as a public health priority, not only a clinical concern. For a 'younger older' demographic, targeted programs such as *Strength for Life* provide valuable preventative activity, and for 'older older' people, these programs can be a path back to strength and confidence.

Recommendation:
That the Plan prioritise falls and injury prevention and functional mobility programs as core components of injury prevention and healthy ageing strategies.

4. Age-Friendly, Climate-Resilient Environments

COTA SA supports the Plan's inclusion of built environments and climate adaptation as determinants of public health. These issues are particularly relevant to older people, who are more vulnerable to extreme heat, poor housing conditions and transport exclusion.

An age-friendly environment is one in which people of all ages can move safely, access services, participate in community life and remain independent. Universal design, accessible public transport, and housing security are not just planning issues — they are health enablers.

The Plan provides an opportunity to integrate these principles more explicitly, ensuring that age and ability are considered in all aspects of public health infrastructure.

COTA SA takes a 'Climate in All' approach to policy development, noting that the impacts of climate change can be more significant for older people, in particular those who are not able to afford to heat and cool their homes. The Public Health Plan notes heat stress, but not the impact of extreme cold, and we believe that this is an area that should be covered.

Recommendations:
That the Plan embed age-friendly design and planning — including transport, housing, and public space — as central to building healthy, liveable and climate-resilient communities.

That the Plan recognise the potential for Local Government to play an increasing role, for example, by providing warm and cool refuges within their communities, (we are aware that some councils have created these), as well as planning around transport and amenity that will be required to ensure that these refuges serve their purpose appropriately.

Conclusion

The *Draft South Australian Public Health Plan 2025–2030* is a welcome and well-considered framework that reflects contemporary public health thinking and positions South Australia for future challenges.

COTA SA supports the direction of the Plan and its strong emphasis on prevention, equity, and collaboration. We believe it can be further strengthened by embedding ageing as a strategic consideration across all health priorities.

The lived experience of older South Australians — particularly in relation to cognitive health, navigation, inclusion and physical resilience — offers valuable insight into how public health strategies can be designed and delivered more effectively.

As the peak body representing South Australians 50+, we look forward to contributing to the Plan's implementation and to ongoing collaboration with SA Health and sector partners to build a healthier, more connected South Australia.

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