



Submission to the review of the administration of My Aged Care to Office of the Inspector General of Aged Care

Prepared by
COTA Australia

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About COTA Australia

COTA Australia is the peak body representing the almost nine million Australians over 50. For over 70 years our systemic advocacy has been improving the diverse lives of older people in policy areas such as health, retirement incomes, and more. Our broad agenda is focussed on tackling ageism, respecting diversity, and the empowerment of older people to live life to the full.

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Introduction

This review is important as there is a significant need to investigate the barriers, challenges and experience of people seeking to access aged care. Older people regularly inform COTA Australia of their challenges in accessing the system.

This submission focuses on the user experience of My Aged Care and its alignment with the needs of older people, a key criterion of the review terms of reference.

While we acknowledge the Inspector General's focus will be on the activities up until a referral to an assessor occurs, we have provided information beyond this point because older people view My Aged Care as the major support for them up until the time their services commence.

As part of the aged care reform agenda the Australian Government has made a significant investment in improving access to the aged care system through My Aged Care (MAC). The My Aged Care website and call centre, complemented by face-to-face workers in Services Australia, (including its front line and Aged Care Service Officers (ACSO) staff) provide information, advice and support for older people to register and be assessed for aged care services.

Additional investment in care finder and navigation services and advocacy support has also strengthened and improved access to the aged care system. This investment has been required, at least in part, because of the limitations of MAC in supporting all older people to access aged care. The focus on a centralised website and phone channel approach has required the development of complementary localised/regional face to face navigational and advocacy support for disadvantaged populations.

Systemic Improvement

However, many older people, their families, friends and carers, have a frustrating, confusing and difficult experience with MAC. Systemic improvement recommendations will need to focus on tangible and transparent performance benchmarks. Publication of the benchmarks and MACs performance against them will be critical in driving consistency of approach to aged care entry point services (website, phone channel and face to face Service Australia workers). A MAC performance benchmark framework should enable an evaluation of how effectively the 'front door' of the aged care system is working separately from any impact related to deficiencies in the rest of the system such as the inadequate supply and distribution of funded aged care services (including home support, in-home care and residential care) and worker shortages.

Role Clarity

There is some confusion amongst older people, their families, friends and carers and in the community about the scope and role of My Aged Care. Questions include:

- Is it just a website or a website and phone service?

- Does it also include a face-to-face workforce?
- What is the role of My Aged Care in assessment?

While we understand that MAC undertakes the initial discussion and refers to either a RAS or an ACAT this isn't clear to older people. Moving to a national single assessment service may streamline individuals experience to an extent.

Publicly, My Aged Care is referred to it as a website and phone service. Yet older people often refer to their My Aged Care assessor coming to visit them.

Visibility

Our state and territory COTAs inform us that many people are not aware that My Aged Care exists. This is particularly the case for people who do not have access to the internet and only have a landline phone. Finding out about My Aged Care is often by 'word of mouth' or chance meeting with someone or an organisation that points people in the right direction.

Service Availability

A key challenge for My Aged Care and the aged care system is the long waiting times for older people and their families, friends and carers to register, receive an assessment, be assigned a place/package, onboard with a provider and commence services.

Data on waiting times across the five stages from application to service commencement is not available. However, recent responses to Government Questions on Notice¹ indicate an average wait time of up to 13 months depending on the service(s) required by an individual and the prioritisation that person receives. In this long waiting time, a person's health and quality of life can deteriorate. Past evidence indicates around 10,000 people die per year whilst waiting for a home care package.² The impact is compounded if the registration and assessment booking is not personable, providing clear information on the process and what to expect.

In the post assessment process aged care providers may reject referrals because they do not have capacity. This is often not communicated to older people, and they are left waiting to be contacted. It is our understanding that there is usually no follow up from the assessment team or My Aged Care with older people to communicate outcomes and work out next steps.

¹ See COTA Australia, Submission to the Inspector General on 2024 Progress Report on Implementation of Aged Care Royal Commission Recommendations

² <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/apr/22/more-than-50000-older-australians-died-while-waiting-for-approved-home-care-since-2017-data-shows>

Evidence Based Submission

This submission is informed by a survey, conducted by COTA Australia between 10 May 2024 and 26 May 2024, targeting people using My Aged Care in the past 2 years. Out of a total of 747 respondents, 619 respondents had accessed My Aged Care in the past 2 years.

Questions addressed user experience related to My Aged Care service channels including the website, phone channel, Services Australia face to face centres and Aged Care Service Officers. It also inquired about support provider by navigators, care finders and advocates and timing to book an assessment. The survey questions were based on the list of questions provided by the Inspector General to guide this submission process regarding the administration of MAC.

The survey also elicited insightful and useful commentary on the experiences which have been included throughout this submission.

In addition, the submission reflects COTA Australia's ongoing engagement with older people about their aged care experiences.

The general and broad findings from our survey are:

- The experience of people using the phone service is variable, but it is seen as a more effective mechanism than the website for registering people for aged care services.
- The time taken from registration through to assessment, the development of a care plan and assignment of a place/package is confusing, frustrating, and distressing. Following this, the older person still has to find a provider, be onboarded by their chosen provider and have their services commence. Older people, their families, friends, and carers are generally not aware of how long these processes take. A lack of clear waiting times at each stage erode confidence in the aged care system.
- Respondents waited more than a week for an assessment appointment to be booked.
- Services Australia face to face centres are a less utilised service channel in accessing aged care services. Their effectiveness and performance benchmarks require further investigation.
- A significant minority of people using My Aged Care (about a third of survey respondents) have used a navigator, care finder or advocate to access aged care services and receive the services they need. Most people have a positive experience in using navigator, care finder or advocacy services.
- Whilst a small group (less than 20 percent of respondents) have used an Aged Care Specialist Officer (ACSO), many respondents provided comments that described the experience positively.

We recommend:

Aged Care System

- Commitment to goal of 30 days waiting time between registration and service commencement.

My Aged Care Performance

- Development of a comprehensive My Aged Care wait times report, including performance benchmarks to monitor progress and improvement. This should include the five stages of application/eligibility screening completed, assessment, place/package assignment, provider onboarding the client and service commencement. Performance benchmarks should be developed and evaluated through regular engagement with MAC users.
- Clear information on the allocation and use of the administrative MAC code as part of the registration and assessment booking process. The My Aged Care client portal should have easy access to this information for participants and/or applicants.
- MAC should report real time availability data from aged care providers and publish it on its website. This may take time and a roadmap to achieve this may be required.
- There should be more prominent information about self- management and the services that offer this option. Self-management information should be provided on all MAC channels.
- Changes should be implemented to ensure that referral codes allow for multiple providers to receive the necessary information to prepare a quote. Only when the older person accepts the offer from a provider, should the referral codes prevent any other provider from accessing it.

My Aged Care Website

- The call centre should be better promoted on the MAC website. The MAC call centre My Aged Care telephone number should be moved to be situated at the top of the website home page.

My Aged Care Call Centre

- Publishing My Aged Care phone service data that includes waiting times for first answer, total on hold times after initial answer, follow up call return times, time to complete application/screening/registration information.
- Exploration of a streamlined approach where a My Aged Care phone operator can directly book an assessment appointment as part of the initial application call if eligibility is approved.

Care Finders and navigation services

- Extend the Care Finder target population to deliver funded local/regional information and navigation services that support people who require targeted, small scale navigation support and are not from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Aged Care Specialist Officers

- Expand ACSO's to all locations within a redeveloped Older Person's Service Offer approach. The Government's new Aged Care Service Officer's program and the roll out of the Care Finders program for those with greater needs has been positive. However, expanded education and information services delivered locally are needed to support larger number of people with lower-level complexity needs.

Overview of satisfaction with My Aged Care service channels

The table below illustrates the comparative level of satisfaction with My Aged Care service channels based on our survey of people who have used My Aged Care in the past two years.

Service Channel	Usage	% of total respondents very likely/likely to recommend to family/friends	% of total respondents very unlikely/unlikely to recommend to family/friends	% of total respondents unsure whether to recommend to family/friends
Website	66.4%	54%	25.2%	20.8%
Phone service	78%	62.4%	15.5%	22.1%
Services Australia face to face centres	21.8%	60.7%	23.1%	16.2%
Navigator, care finder, advocate	31.2%	75.7%	11.1%	13.2%

Website

Most people who have engaged with My Aged Care have used the website.

In our survey, targeting people who had used My Aged Care in the past two years, about two thirds (63.4%) had used the website.

Of this group, 41% found the website difficult to navigate and 31% stated that it did not provide the information they needed. Only 17% stated that the website provided all the information they needed at the time to make decisions about receiving aged care.

A third of respondents (34%) stated that the website was useful overall.

When asked how likely they were to recommend the My Aged Care website to family and friends, over half of respondents (54%) replied likely or very likely.

There are a range of factors influencing the user experience of people using the My Aged Care website including:

- A strong preference for speaking to a person who provides information specific to their circumstances.
- A lack of knowledge and understanding about My Aged Care and the registration and assessment process contributed to people preferring the phone service or seek face to face support.
- A lack of computer literacy and confidence with online information.
- Being overwhelmed by the volume of information and challenges with the website search functions.
- Being visually or hearing impaired made the website difficult to use.
- The accuracy, timeliness, and presentation of information. Some people discover that service information on the website is incorrect or out of date when they contact providers. Others, find the language alienating or not personable.
- The lack of aged care service availability in some locations, particularly in rural and regional areas.

Overall, the response of older people to using the My Aged Care website is mixed. Many people find information on the website useful but less effective in assisting them to access the specific services they need.

Prefer to speak to somebody

Many people would prefer to speak to somebody to receive the aged care information they need.

“I do not understand everything about the website, and I have to phone up to find out what I want to know.”

"I find it easier to speak with a human person, so then my questions get answers."

"I used the site to assess my eligibility for both my partner and myself. I failed! Rang the hot line and got a very helpful person who completed the assessment for both of us and confirmed that we qualified!"

It's clear that many people will use websites to do more than just gather information however, when they encounter a difficulty that isn't easily addressed or resolved the preference is to talk to someone.

Recommendation

We recommend that the call centre should be better promoted on the MAC website. The MAC call centre telephone number should be moved to be situated at the top of the website home page.

Understanding My Aged Care and the aged care registration and assessment process

The My Aged Care website provides details that leads users through a series of steps but there is still confusion for some about the purpose or scope of My Aged Care and the aged care registration and assessment process.

"I needed the assistance of my son to access it and to use it. It did not provide practical advice that I needed to navigate the My Aged Care system. It is not easy to use, and I found it did not provide practical knowledge, information, or advice that I could act on to identify and express my medical conditions and the help I needed to optimally use the My Aged Care system".

"I have to admit that I am confused by what is meant by ""My Aged Care", originally it seems to me it was just a website and now it appears to be referred to as though it is the Aged Care System. I have sought information about the Aged Care Program, and I guess I have used the so called "My Aged Care" perhaps no more than as a portal as which it does not always work. These kinds of websites invariably end up in a circularity that leads you around in circles asserting things but often being short an actual information.

Many respondents to our survey stated, in passing, that they felt obligated to use the website as it was the only place to receive information on aged care services while a small number commented that they found it easier to access information from provider websites.

“Did not provide sufficient detail requiring me to seek information from other sources.... *definitely not a 'one stop shop'.*”

Recommendations

That clear information on the allocation and use of the administrative MAC code as part of the registration and assessment booking process. The My Aged Care client portal should have easy access to this information for participants and/or applicants.

MAC should report real time availability data from aged care providers and publish it on its website. This may take time and a roadmap to achieve this may be required.

Changes should be implemented to ensure that referral codes allow for multiple providers to receive the necessary information to prepare a quote. Only when the older person accepts the offer from a provider, should the referral codes prevent any other provider from accessing it.

Computer literacy and confidence

Computer literacy to understand the website information or use the website effectively to meet their needs is an issue for those having to access MAC.

“If you are not computer literate it was difficult to find what information you need to take the next step.”

“I found it very difficult to use when I was looking for care for my brother. Not having the skills to understand the more complex meanings of abbreviations, means I was going to back time and time again to look it up. Simplification is needed! As we age, these things become more difficult to retain as information, and computer skills may be very basic.”

Difficulties for the visually and hearing impaired

A specific challenge with the website, referred to in our survey, and validated through our ongoing engagement with older people, is being visually and hearing impaired.

“Because I was acting on behalf of someone else, who is blind and has no family, it was difficult to deal with website. The only way I could help him utilise my aged care was to arrange a meeting at his home and for him to give permission for me to act on his behalf. The assumption that everyone can use a website is common today and is extremely frustrating as so many aged people do not have access to the internet or are visually impaired.”

"The complexities of using My Aged Care are horrendous if you don't have the internet available, or you have no online presence. It is also extremely difficult for vision and hearing-impaired people who do not have family or friends who can assist."

Other barriers

Some older people face barriers and challenges in accessing services they need. This includes difficulties communicating over the phone due to hearing loss, cognitive decline, no support person/s to communicate on their behalf, lack of technology skills (using MAC website), understanding language for people from CALD backgrounds where English is not their first language.

Our survey particularly highlighted difficulties for people who are visually impaired and those with hearing loss.

We note that other support services like interpreter services (TIS), services for people with hearing loss (National Relay Service) could be utilised to understand and access My Aged Care. It is possible that this may generate further complications and barriers to aged care system entry.

Accuracy, timeliness, and presentation of information

Respondents to our survey expressed a range of challenges and frustrations with the accuracy, timeliness, and presentation of information on the website.

"My Aged Care website relating to service providers is typically out of date and contains contrary information to providers' websites."

"There is a fundamental failure of the system (driven from within My Aged Care as the reference point) to provide comparable information between providers. There should be a simple tool (like with finance companies providing the Comparison Rate for interest on loans) to be able to compare providers on a like-for-like basis relating to their costs of service provision - whether fully managed or self-managed. I had to create a massive spreadsheet to produce results of hours-of-service provision per \$ of fees, calculated from the service providers' websites and through phone calls to providers (not My Aged Care website), to be able to 'approximate' a like-for-like comparison. Even then I was in some cases not fully sure if I had genuinely comparable information if I was unsuccessful in contacting some providers by phone. Around 20% of providers did not answer their phone contact number listed on their website."

"It should have real-time information on availability of providers to take on clients. If the government assigns the number of packages to each provider. That allow clients to contact the providers with some confidence and arrange contract for services. Or put on a waiting list and see the client's ability to obtain a provider. Also, My Aged Care does not provide a written notification for those on home support services."

"Language could be clearer particularly for those a) not employed by MAC or other APS departments, b) newbies to the ENTIRE aged care scene and c) unfamiliar with health jargon/terms. Site can be VERY dense with ALL of the above making it difficult at times to follow/understand."

"Sometimes it was difficult to choose the direction. I feel it was written by people who have a good understanding of the acronyms and choices. I am computer literate and have a Degree in Information Science and found myself wading through. My husband would have had no chance. And because it is an emotional and difficult time in life dealing with someone else's needs, it was time consuming, and I dreaded returning to the site. Sometimes a real person is what is required just to point the way because nothing is black and white."

Finding services that deliver self-management

Information about services offering self-management is difficult to find on the website.

"The most difficult information to get was in regard to Self-Managed Care. I have been on a Level 4 HC package since September 2023. It administered by Anglicare and has been a nightmare".

"Not up to date with fees charged for management. Difficult to identify self-managed providers. Website felt cumbersome and not user-friendly."

Recommendation

We recommend that there should be more prominent information about self-management and the services that offer this option. Self-management information should be provided on all MAC channels.

Finding local and specialist information

Many people using the website were frustrated the lack information about available services in their local area.

“When looking for residential care, notice that not all aged care facilities are listed. Also, when using the “with availability” tab, it is like looking at a car dealership - they say there is one available but when you call, no there are no vacancies.”

“When I used the ‘Find a Provider’ tool and provided the postcode, many ‘Providers’ were displayed who did not provide services in the required area. The information on the My Aged Care website wasn’t up to date so it resulted in a lot of timewasting and frustration.”

“Clunky. It takes numerous steps to find out information about local facilities and star rating. It would be easy if you could click on a Map and instantly see all facilities in the local area and their star ratings.”

General navigation challenges

Many users of My Aged Care have difficulties in navigating the website.

“Totally useless, unfriendly, non-informative, very difficult to navigate etc. In short, a very frustrating and fruitless experience.”

“Difficult to find anything on the website and the information was often confusing.”

“Website is not easy to navigate to find specific information. The assistance to find local aged care providers is not easy.”

“It is far from easy to navigate (and would be impossible for a 94 with English as a second language, like my mother) does not clearly provide all the information needed to make reliable decisions just simply doesn’t meet the requirements of the very elderly.”

Phone channel

The My Aged Care phone service is a primary way that older people, their carers, and families register for aged care services and seek an assessment.

Of survey respondents using My Aged Care in the past two years, 78 percent had used the phone service. A higher proportion of respondents than using the website.

Older people, their family, friends, and carers, have a variable and mixed experience when using the phone service.

Whilst many people had frustrating and difficult experiences in using the phone service, it received a more positive response overall in our survey compared with the website.

Based on survey comments, the phone service enabled some people to be registered for aged care and booked in for an assessment in an effective way.

Of these:

- 47 percent stated that the person they spoke to was knowledgeable.
- 46 percent stated that the information and/or advice they received was useful and accurate.
- 18 percent stated that the information and/or advice received was not reliable.
- 16 percent stated that they did not receive the information they needed.

When asked how likely they were to recommend the My Aged Care phone service to family and friends, 65 percent replied likely or very likely.

A dominant theme regarding the use of the phone service was the time taken to receive information or complete requirement to be registered and accessed for aged care services including waiting times on the phone, being transferred between different staff members, being placed on hold, or waiting for a staff member to ring back. Consistent with website users, people using the phone channel also referred to the long waiting times to be assessed and receive services.

Phone waiting times

Published data shows that MAC is generally prompt in answering initial calls. However, there is no available data on processes and waiting times beyond the incoming call. The response to our survey demonstrates that many people have experienced long times being placed on hold or significant delays in return phone calls.

"I have received conflicting information from various individuals. This was frustrating given you have to wait for over an hour to get your phone call answered.

"The waiting time on the phone is excessive - over an hour and a half."

"The wait times on the phone are ridiculous, 45 minutes, 30 mins...not unusual. This is unacceptable.

"The most upsetting experience is when you have gotten up early to make sure you can have the phone answered when you call (at 8am, because if you call later than that you cannot get through), and then wait 45 minutes to an hour for the officer to get on the line to you, and then she hangs up because she thinks she cannot hear you.!"

"The phone interaction is the only aspect of the Aged Care system that works well IF you can get through - other interaction with Centrelink has been disrespectful, abusive, and traumatic."

"There was often a long waiting time before being put through to an advisor. Also, the prompts as to which button to push for appropriate information was not clear and I often took a punt. The amount of identification information was asked by the automated phone, the section answering, and the individual speaking to you."

Recommendations

Publishing My Aged Care phone service data that includes waiting times for first answer, total on hold times after initial answer, follow up call return times, time to complete application/screening/registration information.

Exploration of a streamlined approach where a My Aged Care phone operator can directly book an assessment appointment as part of the initial application call if eligibility is approved.

Waiting time to be assessed and receive services

Respondents to our survey also expressed their confusion and frustration about the long waiting times to receive an assessment and services. They told us of repeated phone calls to My Aged Care, assessors, and service providers.

There is also confusion about receiving a MAC code and being placed in a queue.

"I had a helper to call My Aged Care as I am deaf. The person I spoke with initially was very helpful but the promise of my call being returned at a later date did not happen. The second time I contacted My Aged Care to

ask for an assessment I was put on a list of people requiring assessment and I had to wait, again, to be contacted with a date for my interview. This took some months of telephone calls before a date was set - I am talking of months, not days or weeks."

"As a new Registrant for My Aged Care, my experience with the telephone & administrative service for Registration and process for Assessment and Referral for Home Aids was convoluted, complicated, complex and time-consuming. I was advised that the in-home Assessment itself would take 2-6 weeks waiting time. In total the number of service Organisations involved was approx. SEVEN. The time period involved to obtain the final Home Aid item was approx. SEVEN months! My personal follow-up with the various service providers involved numerous telephone calls which led to stress on my part. In essence, My Aged Care is an 'umbrella' agency that offloads services to auxiliary providers and leaves it up to the customer Registrant to do the tedious following-up."

"The first time I rang up very stressed and confused because I didn't know what a MAC code was. The lady who answered was extremely helpful and explained everything to me, and then we dialled mum in, to get her permission to sort this out on her behalf. The lady flicked the codes from permanent to respite. A few weeks later when I called up to flick the codes back to permanent, I sat in a phone queue for at least 1.5h. Eventually I found the website and muddled my way through it."

Variability in staff knowledge and communication

A key issue identified through our survey is that callers got different answers from different operators at MAC, highlighting a lack of consistency in information and advice between staff members.

"There is no continuity about issues from one operator to the next. Some operators have English as a second language. They are hard to understand. My wife had to end a call for that reason. They talk about support packages as if they are available. In reality they are often not funded."

"It was a mixed bag. some people were helpful and went out of their way to explain a rather convoluted process. others were perfunctory."

"One person tells you one thing, and another says something else and it's a case of going around in circles. I mainly needed help for the person I am carer for but also wanted some assistance myself yet although we were promised a lot, there has been very little further information, although we have both been assessed."

"Hard to get on sometimes. wait time too long and could not hold on. The quality of information depends on who answers. all very polite. I have found Aged Care Providers actually more knowledgeable and helpful."

Other MAC users referred to the response from phone staff as not being very personable or attempting to understand the specific circumstances of the person they were talking to.

"The people try to do their best to help however they are most times reading of the scripts given to them they are caring they say there isn't much they can do, or they transfer you on to another area and most times you just go around in circles it's so easy to talk the talk but walking the walk just doesn't cut it."

"It was hard to get the person on the phone to understand my current situation".

In contrast, some people had a positive experience with the phone service.

"The person with whom I communicated was courteous & although he didn't have correct information at hand, connected me with the correct people who were able to help me & they in turn have been back in touch, following up. All in all, I'm very impressed with the kindness & understanding shown me. A healthy 92-year-old lady, I don't require much assistance but these smaller items of help, keep me independent & are gratefully received.

"The person we spoke to helped us kindly, accurately, superbly, accurately. We were new and in a crisis after mum 85 and dad 86 had series of sudden major setbacks (dad in icu) They had stayed fully independent previously so no assessment yet and had immediate life-threatening needs on discharge.

Cannot thank the telephone person enough. Also (super important). He picked up. We could ask questions and get a vague plan together."

"I have always found the staff for My Aged Care on the phone to be incredibly polite and helpful in every way."

"I thought the agent was patient, polite and extremely helpful."

Understanding the process

There is confusion and frustration regarding the process to access an aged care assessment, particularly the allocation of a My Aged Care administrative code.

"People using this phone service should be made aware the 1800 200 422 number is in fact a 'CALL CENTRE'". Like myself, callers are mis-informed. Usually passed on to the 'Assessment team'. If on this 'assessment' your requirements are met, your information & a 'Referral Code' is forwarded to 2 'Aged Care' suppliers? they in turn send copies of their booklets to have one of their Occupational Therapies come out to you. (you are still totally unaware of the 'system'). If your requirements change you are advised to request a new Assessment, but you must be sure to request a new ""Assessment in the home Review"", otherwise it will be over the phone, (Who cannot see your deterioration?) However, to increase your help you are advised it is quicker to request a new Home Assessment? As your original assessment does not cover assisted cost for further needs. You discover this months later."

"I asked specific questions on an issue at the time. My husband received codes to access services. Apparently, these are available to providers who take them up. In order to get an item, I had to ring a provider, ask them to surrender the number and ring back to My Aged Care to have it reinstated. Oh yes. Ring very early in the morning or you can wait and wait. Frustrating. And you ask if I would recommend this service. What other choice?"

Inadequate written information or file notes

Respondents referred to difficulties with inadequate written information or file notes.

“I gave the person I spoke to my income details. When I received the written confirmation, it was completely wrong.”

“Every time I telephoned, the speaker did not know of my previous conversations, and seemed incapable of accessing where my case had reached. My updated information was not accessible to whomsoever I was then speaking. My medical situation worsened over the more than two years of trying to get an updated assessment, and it took disproportionately long to be reassessed despite many telephone calls giving updated information.”

Service Australia Face to Face Centres

Service Australia face to face centres can be used by older people, their families, friends and carers to receive information and support in accessing aged care services. Given their broader remit, are not used as much as the My Aged Care website and phone service.

In this section, we are referring to the general Service Australia face to face centre response to older people, not specialist positions like the Aged Care Specialist Officers.

Only 22 percent of respondents had used Service Australia face to face centres in the last two years.

Of these, 42percent found the person they spoke with was knowledgeable, 36 percent found the information and/or advice they received was useful. Information and/or advice was not reliable for 18 percent and 16 percent did not receive the information they needed.

When asked how likely they would be to recommend Service Australia face to face centres to family and friends, 61 percent replied likely or very likely with 23 percent replying very unlikely or unlikely.

Waiting times, multiple appointments, accessing an appointment

Survey respondents referred to the lengthy process of seeing Service Australia face to face services usually involving multiple appointments.

“I had to make 4 trips to sort out my mother's finances to assess her level of payment for nursing home costs. Eventually spoke to someone on the phone who finalised the matter.”

“They are quite stressed about what information they have to provide and have had several visits to Services Australia to sort it out. But in the end, it was the best way for them to get what they needed. Face to Face is the best way for elderly people. They have had dealings with a Nurse Navigator who was very helpful.”

“The centre I used is always busy and sometimes the staff do not know everything, but everyone was polite and did not brush me off. However, there were times when I had to come back again when it was not required. Mainly due to staff being new and not knowing everything. I don't blame them.”

For some there were also challenges in accessing an appointment.

“Too hard to get a face-to-face appointment. Want to do over the phone. Have to keep requesting a meet.”

“Whilst the person I spoke to was helpful the process I had to go through to get a face-to-face consult was short of being farcical. E.g. went to my normal service centre and was told no longer had a aged care consultant. Was then told that my closest service centre did not have a consultant either. Was then given a date for another service centre (over a month later). Two weeks later I was contacted saying that centre was no longer an option and eventually ended up at a centre which was nowhere near my residence. The time from start to finish was over 5 weeks.”

Poor, unhelpful, and variable customer service and information

Respondents referred to poor, unhelpful, and variable customer service from Service Australia face to face centres.

“Most staff try to cover up and try to get you finishes ASAP.”

“The person I dealt with was terrible. I could not understand what they were saying and was made to feel like an absolute idiot.”

“This depends on where you access Services Australia. I had dealings with the Service in < regional South Australia>³ where the person I dealt with

³ COTA Australia can provide uncensored quotes to the Inspector General on request.

was extremely helpful, new her stuff and kind. But in a <metropolitan Melbourne suburb> the woman I dealt with was absolutely horrible. She was mean, gave me incorrect information, threatened my mother (who has Alzheimer's dementia and is 92) with legal action if my mother sold her house and I didn't let them know (I have POA), despite the fact that that was the reason I went to see them. I have felt frightened to go back there again in case the same woman is there."

"The Supervisor at the <outer metropolitan Melbourne suburban> office was rude, impatient & irritable. The person who we spoke to was ignorant & sought support from the Supervisor constantly which increased her irritation. The staff member seemed to be on a ""Return to Work"" program & should never be rostered on the front-line."

Lack of knowledge and distrust of government services

From our regular interactions with older people over many years, we know that some in the community find it hard to engage with government services. A number of our survey respondents expressed a lack of knowledge and a distrust of government services.

"I did not know Services Australia existed or its purpose".

"In 2016 Centrelink staff reduced me to tears on multiple occasions. They also told me that -\$300K = +\$78K. when I protested saying that that was mathematically impossible, they brushed me off with saying that their computer was correct. I had to get a Medicare lady to find the name of a visiting Centrelink senior manager and organise an appointment for me with him, just to get to the bottom of that rubbish. Ever since then I hated going into Services Australia and approached it with extreme dread and distrust."

Positive service experience

There were also some positive comments about the Service Australia face to face centre experience.

"Only had the need to see them on a couple of occasions, found the staff very helpful."

"Extremely beneficial especially I had an urgent situation."

"I did receive correct and timely information."

Assessment

About two thirds of respondents to our survey (67%) stated that they had used My Aged Care to organise an aged care assessment in the last two years.

Of those respondents, 74 percent, said it took more than a week to book an assessment after first contacting My Aged Care. For 18 percent, the assessment was booked within a week. For only 3 percent of respondents was the assessment was booked on the same day.

Our survey did not specifically focus on the user experience with assessment services however some respondents provided feedback on their experience with assessors and the assessment process.

"The person representing our local Aged Care Assessment team in 2023, in our suburb, visited myself & husband in our retirement village house. She inspired no confidence in dress or with her aggressive verbal manner. She shocked us when we asked her to list the criteria that would give anyone a Home Help package. She said it for her it was based on 2 items:

- 1) The inability to wipe your bottom clean*
- 2) The inability to self-manage any daily medication*

Failure to accomplish these 2 tasks, meant she might recommend someone having access to a full package! Neither of us have since bothered contacting the local WA Aged Care programme if that's the quality of home interview staff!"

"When I asked to be assessed for a My Aged Care package, the person told me that I wouldn't get a package; I should step out of the queue and allow someone else who "really needed it "to take my place. This made me upset and a bit angry. So unprofessional. I stood my ground and insisted that I be assessed. Eventually I was assessed- a delay partly because I live in a capital city and there were many people waiting. Not everyone was pleasant on the phone, but there's no alternative to ringing them. So, I would advise people to keep trying."

"I waited to be contact regarding a couple of items I required for my home after I had been assessed but had to chase up the provider to find out what was happening as they didn't provide me with any timeline. I was never told about the My Aged Care website on the MyGov site and have only just

established it. This is over 1 year since I was first assessed. The provider I have is useless and I'm looking to find a new provider as their head office is in Melbourne, I live in NSW but have to have contact with the office in Queensland. So, when I ring their office for help, they have to transfer me to the Queensland office, but three times now I have been cut off, so never speak to anyone about my requirements. I find getting information is extremely stressful and it's like no one really want to help you get help."

Given the importance of the assessment for individuals and its connection to how people experience MAC it is recommended/suggested that this is an area for further investigation by the Inspector General.

Aged Care navigators, care finders and advocates

Nearly one third of survey respondents (31%) had used an aged care navigator, care finder or advocacy service to assist with understanding My Aged Care and to access aged care services.

Of these respondents, 76 percent stated that they were likely or very likely to recommend aged care navigators, care finders and advocates to friends and family.

Positive and helpful experience

Most survey comments about navigators, care finders and advocates were positive.

"I knew of aged care because of a neighbour but did not know my way around it. I got help from the ACT Advocate service - a lady came and sat with me while the aged care assessment took place. She was very helpful. It is all a bit of a mystery and a nightmare. It is such a complicated business. All opinions about providers are subjective. They are selling me aged care services. They exaggerate the kind of service and how well you will feel. They are short of staff. I can't get transport from provider but can get cab charges. They original promise has not been fulfilled,"

"I had to read an entire book written by an aged care navigator that I happened to meet during a work event. The system is so complicated for anyone to navigate and understand. Without the knowledge I learned from the book I read I would have struggled to understand the difference between CHSP and ACAT assessments and how to help my mother get the appropriate assessment she needed, and I work for a health organisation."

"I had a face-to-face interview as well as a phone contact and, on both occasions, found the navigator helpful and knowledgeable."

Lack of awareness and promotion

A small number of survey respondents referred to a lack of awareness and promotion of aged care navigators, care finders and advocates.

"It is not widely known that you are able to speak to a navigator, care finder or advocate to ask for assistance. The advertisements just give a telephone number to call about My Aged Care. There is nothing in the advertisements to tell you that you can ask for any kind of assistance. If you just call the telephone number the person that you speak to, does not tell you that you are able to have a navigator, care finder or advocate. My navigator was helpful, yes. But I wanted to also include these comments in this section of the survey."

"I did not know about Navigator, or other services that offer assistance to elders. Where is this information published? I have used OPAN on the advice of friends experiencing difficulties with the Aged Care System like me."

Recommendation

The Care Finder program should be continued as it enables more people to access aged care services and enhances the overall system. This submission highlights the importance and value of localised face to face services providing information, supporting navigation and linking older people to services.

Extend the Care Finder target population to deliver funded local/regional information and navigation services that support people who require targeted, small scale navigation support and are not from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Aged Care Specialist Officer

In our survey, 19 percent of respondents had used an Aged Care Specialist Officer (ACSO).

Survey respondents who used ACSOs were largely positive.

"The aged care specialist-I would truly recommend. He made me comfortable with my own personal circumstances, yet he was unbiased or intrusive. I enjoyed speaking with him as it gave me valuable advice."

"Last year, I spoke to ACSOs from <metropolitan ACT> in my area. Those ACSO people are amazing. They are completely different to the usual staff that I encounter at Services Australia. I am constantly singing their praises."

Whenever anyone mentions that they are even contemplating aged care, I recommend the ACSOs. There need to be more of these people and in more locations. They need to be better promoted. I only became aware of them after a conversation with OPAN. I sent the info to our nursing home that was in the process of closing down and asked them to send out to all the other families who were negotiating new contracts with new facilities. Noone, not even the very experienced nursing home manager was aware of the ACSOs until I shared the info about them.”

“Both my husband has the same ACSO though different times. She was helpful. There were delays but not her fault - mostly because of the funding for the packages. For myself I did not use the approvals for the services at all as it was still expensive and I could not really afford them.”

Recommendation

Expand ACSO's to all locations within a redeveloped Older Person's Service Offer approach. The Government's new Aged Care Service Officer's program and the roll out of the Care Finders program for those with greater needs has been positive. However, expanded education and information services delivered locally are needed to support larger number of people with lower-level complexity needs.