



# **Victorian Government Electoral Matters Committee Inquiry into Voting Centre Accessibility**

A Dementia Australia submission

26 February 2026

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## Dementia in Australia

Dementia Australia is the peak body representing the estimated 446,500 people living with dementia and their carers across Australia (1). Dementia prevalence in Australia is set to increase to more than a million people by 2065 (2). In 2026, there are an estimated 29,000 people living with young onset dementia (a diagnosis between the age of 18-65), and this is expected to increase to an estimated 41,000 people by 2054 (3). In Victoria in 2026, there are an estimated 113,900 people living with all forms of dementia. This figure is projected to increase to an estimated 216,400 by 2054 (4). Dementia is the leading cause of death for all Australians, as well as a leading contributor to disease burden (5).

At least 54% of people living in permanent residential aged care have dementia and two thirds of people living with dementia live in the community (6). People living with dementia in both the community and any form of supported care have the right to vote and should be encouraged and supported to do so.

## Living experience expertise

In preparing this submission, Dementia Australia surveyed Victorians living with dementia and former and current carers who are members of a large national network known as Dementia Australia's Dementia Advocate group. This submission is informed by the experiences and observations provided in the survey and unless otherwise identified, all quotes are de-identified, verbatim responses from Victorian Dementia Advocates.

## Supporting people living with dementia to vote

Recent surveys conducted by Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and Dementia Australia show that community awareness and understanding of dementia remains limited. The 2023 AIHW Dementia Awareness Survey asked more than 5,400 Australians what they knew about dementia and their attitudes towards people living with the condition. The broad findings of the survey noted that 'Generally, Australians know little about dementia' and there was a clear need to improve the Australian community's knowledge of the condition (7).

These findings are consistent with results from Dementia Australia surveys over the last decade, showing an ongoing lack of awareness and understanding about dementia in the Australian community. This lack of awareness is at least in part because, unlike a physical disability, the cognitive and other changes that are associated with dementia are often under recognised or rendered 'hidden' or 'invisible.' People living with dementia relate the common experience of being told that they 'can't possibly have dementia' because they do not appear, speak or act in a way that corresponds with community expectations or understanding of the disabling nature of the condition.

"If you just saw them and didn't know them, how would you even know if they had dementia?" (Australian resident with no lived experience of dementia) (8).

The invisible nature of a cognitive disability and the attitudinal and other societally imposed barriers mean people living with dementia can experience stigma, discrimination and other challenges when engaging with people in the broader community. The Dementia Australia 2019 report found that people living with dementia experienced lower levels of social engagement, inclusion, and connectedness within their communities (9).

The 2008 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities represents an important recognition of the rights of people with dementia or cognitive impairment to make decisions about all aspects of their lives. There is no Australian 'gold standard' for assessment of legal capacity or decision-making ability and this has consequences for people living with dementia, who are vulnerable to unconscious bias or presumptions about competency.

It is often, incorrectly, assumed that a diagnosis of dementia means people lack decision-making ability. People living with dementia can experience fluctuating decision-making ability. Fatigue, medication, delirium, illness, and time of day can all have an impact on a person's ability to make an informed decision about a specific issue at a specific time but that does not mean they are unable to make any decisions at any time. A person with dementia may be unable to perform a certain task, but they can still make meaningful decisions about whether they want assistance performing that task.

This is important in the context of supporting a person with dementia to exercise their right to vote. People living with dementia have told us that they have experienced misunderstanding and discrimination at voting centres in the past. This has included voting centre staff who are poorly informed about dementia and the limitations it might involve, inadequate support to participate in the voting process and outright rejection of the right to vote based on the person's dementia diagnosis.

A supported decision-making approach ensures that if required, people living with dementia have the appropriate support to exercise their voting rights. This support could take a variety of forms including the provision of information in different formats at different stages of the condition or the presence of a 'supporter' to ensure that voting instructions are understood, the decision-making process is fully informed, and voting choices are clearly documented.

It is vital that the potential impacts of dementia and the need for support to make decisions is understood across a range of government settings and services, including in State-based voting centres.

In addition to addressing issues related to the physical accessibility of Victorian voting centre venues, this submission addresses how the presentation of information, and assistance provided by staff could be improved to ensure people with dementia are appropriately supported.

**a) The accessibility of voting centres at Victorian State elections, with reference to compliance with disability access standards, including physical access and way finding and**

**b) signage, lighting, and safety measures at polling places**

People living with dementia can experience their surroundings as confusing, disorienting or disabling, particularly when the environment is unfamiliar. For someone living with dementia, the impacts of increased noise, harsh light, visual and physical clutter, unclear wayfinding, confusing signage, and other environmental features can cause anxiety, make a space feel intimidating and interfere with their ability to concentrate on a task.

Selecting voting centre venues with dementia-enabling features can improve accessibility and participation for people living with dementia but equally, this approach will also maximise accessibility and reduce environmental risks that will benefit the entire voting community.

Dementia Advocates reported a range of challenging experiences in relation to the physical features of voting centres at previous Victorian elections, and made the following observations:

No undercover shelter; uninterested (almost bored) staff; not enough room in the booth to assist my husband with dementia. Former carer

Steps to get inside then waiting in long queues. No one available to assist me to sit down while waiting. I have a walking stick. Former carer

My mum felt overwhelmed, very rushed and it was super bright in the voting area. Former carer

Lines are unbelievably long. The wait time to vote is too long for anyone with or without a disability. Not enough staff and not enough booths. Carer

Advocates identified a range of potential measures and interventions that could improve accessibility and support participation for people living with dementia. These included a dedicated queue for people with a disability to reduce the distress of waiting in long queues, a quiet area with seats if waiting was unavoidable, clear, and well signed access for people using wheelchairs or mobility aids, and adequate disability parking spaces.

Quiet area for people with health issues; separate entrance for people using wheelchairs, wheelie walkers. Person living with dementia

You need a "fast lane" as those with dementia often become restless quickly and cannot wait long. Former carer

Separate entrance and waiting area; bigger booths so carers can stay with the person with dementia; smiling staff Former carer

Clear signage. Seating. Person to speak to for assistance & support. Shade & shelter for severe weather...rain or sun. Person living with dementia

Location selection criteria should include sensory environments (reduced noise levels, lighting), ease of navigation, quiet spaces for people who need more time; proximity to aged care facilities. Former carer

Signage to dedicated polling station for disabled people with a disability pension seniors or aged pension cards. Not having to stand in line - to have dedicated voting station for disabled people. Person living with Mild Cognitive Impairment

Compliance with disability access standards, including physical access and way finding including have a disability path clearly identified and defined and that can accommodate wheelchair/walkers. Colour contrasts on signage, help table, that assists with legibility. Adequate disability parking. Carer

The Dementia Australia resource [\*\*Making it Dementia-Friendly\*\*](#), is written by a person living with dementia and offers a comprehensive guide to selecting an appropriate venue for activities, meetings, and events, that will support the participation of people living with dementia.

### **Recommendations for dementia-friendly features to ensure voting centre accessibility**

Dementia Australia recommends consideration of the following dementia-friendly features when selecting a voting centre:

- Conveniently located community venues
- Affordable, accessible transport to the venue
- Adequate disability parking spaces
- Wide, level footpaths where possible, free of obstructions and well maintained
- Accessible elevators, ramps, railings and stairs, and non-slip and non-glare floors and surfaces
- Undercover areas if queues are long to ensure accessibility in all weather conditions
- Seating available internally and externally
- Polling booths wide enough to comfortably accommodate two people if one requires assistance
- Level changes are clearly marked and well lit, with handrails
- Building entrances are clearly visible and well-signed externally and internally
- Signs with large graphics and symbols in clear colour contrast to the background, preferably dark lettering on a light background
- Signs with non-glare lighting and non-reflective coverings
- Colour contrasts for other key interior features to enhance navigation (for example doorways, toilet doors, and toilet seats)
- Minimise street clutter around the venue including excessive signage, music, advertisements, and bollards
- Minimise background noise inside the voting venue
- A dedicated, quiet space for waiting or if someone is anxious or confused

### **(c) the provision of information to voters with accessibility needs**

People living with dementia have unique needs and challenges, particularly in relation to changes in cognition and associated changes in communication abilities. Symptoms associated with different types of dementia can include word finding difficulties, reduced ability to concentrate, and increasing difficulty with reading, writing, comprehension, following a conversation and processing information.

These symptoms can impact on a person's ability and confidence to participate in the voting process. Advocates noted that the format and content of voting information is often cumbersome and was a contributing factor in the voting difficulties experienced by a person living with dementia.

There are too many instructions for people with Dementia - the form is way too long and the print by far too small for people. Often, they don't know who the parties are - what it's all about really. Carer

Even without dementia, navigating a polling booth can be overwhelming for some people. The form is so complex, the process is too complex...the writing too small. Former carer

Assistance version of the form – Plain English with pick one above the line only if this is requested. Carer

The process is not supportive or enabling at the moment...people feel disempowered, stupid, inadequate, and fearful. Carer

While cognisant of the Victorian Electoral Commission requirements for the provision of voting information, Dementia Australia encourages the Electoral Matters Committee to consider providing information in an expanded range of formats to support people living with a disability, including dementia, to vote. Information provided in flexible and responsive formats that meet the communication needs of people living with dementia could include hard copy 'Easy' or 'Plain English' resources, visual representations, audio, video, and other formats.

Providing information and resources in a range of languages and formats will also support the inclusion of people living with dementia from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

### **(c) the provision of assistance to voters with accessibility needs**

Advocates with physical disabilities noted the positive impact of supportive staff in previous voting experiences.

I spoke to an official on arrival who accompanied / helped me up some stairs & guided me to a room to sit down rather than wait in a queue. I requested help & it was provided. Former carer

Given the impacts of the physical environment and the communication and cognitive challenges that many people living with dementia experience as outlined above, Dementia Australia strongly supports the need for some form of dementia awareness or education for any personnel working in voting centres who will be directly engaging with people living with dementia. Understanding how the voting centre environment might be influencing a person's physical and cognitive abilities, their behaviour and wellbeing, and providing the appropriate support, will play a vital role in enabling the person to successfully participate in the voting process. This was affirmed in feedback from Advocates, particularly people living with dementia.

Clearly identified & well versed with how to deal with a dementia person including not taking control of any decision. Person living with dementia

Awareness of Hidden Disabilities. Quiet Place with a Person for assistance (Who understands Dementias). Person living with dementia

What are the processes for staff to support a person with a disability? They need to be co-designed with the person with a disability and new processes and procedures trialled with them. All staff should have to do the same training. Carer

Advocates were also clear about the importance of having a dedicated staff member (easily identified by their clothing and/or badge) who could recognise when a person with a disability needed assistance, direct them to a dedicated queue and quiet table, and provide the appropriate support.

Staff the booths appropriately with fully trained staff who can support person living with dementia. Easily identified disability staff specialist. Big HELP badges and/or diff colour vest with helper clearly marked. Carer

Make the availability of persons to assist clearly visible. Person living with dementia

Flexibility and responsiveness. Need trained people who can recognise someone who needs assistance. Triage people who can then go to a dedicated queue and table. Former carer

Staff assistance training should cover dementia-friendly communication, understanding voting capacity, providing appropriate time, reducing environmental barriers, respecting autonomy while providing practical support. Former carer

Dementia Australia has a range of resources that provide information about dementia, and guidance on how to communicate with and support a person living with the condition. This includes our webpages on [Talking to someone with dementia](#) and [Dementia Language Guidelines](#). Our [Become a Dementia Friend](#) program, which involves watching a series of short videos (fewer than 15 minutes), offers a short and accessible introduction to dementia awareness.

Having at least one staff member who is a Dementia Friend at every polling booth would make a valuable contribution to supporting people living with dementia to participate in the voting process.

#### **d) Any other matters related to the terms of reference.**

Dementia Advocates identified a range of additional ideas to improve the ability of people living with dementia to participate in future Victorian Government elections. These included the need to make the availability of voting by phone, postal voting and pre-poll or early voting clearer to the public. Advocates noted that the pre-poll option would be potentially appealing for people living with a disability, offering less busy voting environments, and allowing planning for family members or support workers to attend with the person if required.

Make it clear that voting can be done by phone if disability requires this i.e. for people with dementia, stroke, and autism. Carer

After My first State Election Experience with Dementia, I feel the Standard could be better for encouragement of Early Voting. Person living with dementia

Pre poll where possible especially in rural areas to expedite assisting people with disability, depending on the area. Carer

A number of Advocates also raised the possibility of allocating dedicated voting days or times for people living with dementia. Making simple modifications to the voting centre environment on the day (including reduced noise, lighting, and signage) could encourage more people with a disability, including those with dementia, to participate in voting.

Need to streamline times, and indicate when person with dementia can go at less popular times or quieter/more accessible times – like they did with supermarket shopping during Covid, and make this clear to their support workers etc Carer

Dedicated day for people living with dementia – change the environment, remove some of signage /quiet environment. Former carer

Voting access for people living in residential aged care was also a consideration. Advocates noted that residents need to be provided with information well in advance of the election and the mobile voting unit attendance, so they are fully informed of their voting rights. It was suggested that mobile units should attend more than once to ensure that every resident that does want to vote has the chance to do so.

Advocates also raised the need for the people living in residential aged care settings to be provided with voting information in dementia-friendly formats, including the role and responsibilities of electoral staff in supporting people to vote and the criteria for removal from the electoral roll. The lack of an appropriate area to ensure privacy for voting in a residential aged care home was also identified as a potential disincentive to voting.

Clearer pathways for postal voting, simplified materials, proactive outreach to aged care facilities. Former carer

Aged Care facilities having Voting arrangements within the facility.... wherever possible. Alternatively, facilitating early Mail Voting. Former carer

Some people who are aged or have dementia wish to be taken off the roll and we need to make it so much easier for people to get off the roll. We should make it easier for carers, family members, or staff to report their preferences, especially in aged care homes. The current process is ridiculous - many residents are fearful of fines and put in blank forms. The process is so difficult for both people and electoral staff. Carer

### **(e) recommendations to improve accessibility for voters at future Victorian State elections**

Dementia Australia recommends:

- Select voting centre venues that consider dementia-enabling features to ensure accessibility and safety for all voters including clear signage, wayfinding, access (including paths suitable for wheelchairs and mobility aids), seating externally and internally and a quiet, dedicated space
- Ensure signage, voting information and any other related resources are provided in a range of formats enabling participation in the voting process for people with different disabilities
- Provide a dedicated queue, voting table and/or allocated times for people with a disability to support their ability and confidence to vote
- Require at least one staff member at every polling booth in Victoria to undertake Dementia Australia's Dementia Friend program, to ensure people living with dementia are appropriately supported to vote
- Allocate at least one person, clearly identified by their attire, to support people living with disabilities, including dementia, to assist with their voting needs
- Maximise the voting participation of people living in residential aged care settings by promoting phone, pre-poll, and postal voting, providing information in advance to prepare residents to vote, and offering multiple voting opportunities

The Electoral Matters Committee Inquiry into voting centre accessibility in Victoria is an important opportunity to improve the engagement and participation of people living with disability, including dementia, in the voting process. We draw the Committee's attention to several other Dementia Australia resources that provide additional information in this context. **Half the Story** is a guide to meaningful consultation with people living with dementia, families, and carers and relevant formation can also be found on our **Voting and dementia** website page.

We would be pleased to discuss any of the issues raised in this submission in more detail.

The Dementia Australia Policy Team can be contacted on: **[PolicyTeam@dementia.org.au](mailto:PolicyTeam@dementia.org.au)**

## References

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9. Dementia Australia. Dementia Action Week Discrimination Survey (2019) 5,767 valid responses collected from people living with dementia, families, carers, volunteers, health and aged care professionals, and people not directly impacted by dementia.