

**Submission to the 2014 - 2015
New South Wales State Budget**

January 2014

National Seniors

Australia

About National Seniors Australia

With around 200, 000 members Australia-wide National Seniors is the consumer lobby for the over-50s. It is the fourth largest organisation of its type in the world.

We give our members a voice – we listen and represent our members’ views to governments, business and the community on the issues of concern to the over 50s.

We keep our members informed – by providing news and information to our members through our Australia-wide branch network, comprehensive website, forums and meetings, bi-monthly lifestyle magazine and weekly e-newsletter.

We provide a world of opportunity – we offer members the chance to use their expertise, skills and life experience to make a difference by volunteering and making a difference to the lives of others.

We help our members save – we offer member rewards with discounts from over 7,000 business across Australia, we offer discount travel and tours designed for the over 50s, and we provide older Australians with affordable, quality insurance to suit their needs.

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Recommendations

The New South Wales Policy Advisory Group strongly supports the overall objectives of the *NSW Ageing Strategy* which encourages seniors to lead active and rewarding lives as valued members of the community.

Our specific recommendations for the 2014-2015 State Budget are as follows:

Housing

1. Ensure that older residents of public housing in New South Wales who have vacant bedrooms are given the option to move into a more suitable residence relevant to their needs before the vacant bedroom charge is applied to their fortnightly rent.
2. Reinstate the Senior's Principal Place of Residence Duty Exemption for older people in New South Wales who want to downsize their home.

Social Inclusion

3. Develop age friendly city and community guidelines relevant to the local context and utilise community groups, such as National Seniors, to assist in implementing guidelines.
4. Continue to provide information in print, by telephone, and in person to older people in New South Wales in collaboration with organisations such as National Seniors Australia.

Health

5. Improve hospital discharge procedures for people who live alone or without access to supports by ensuring that links are made to relevant services before patients are sent home.
6. Support health maintenance programs such as hydrotherapy and tai chi which improve mobility and balance.
7. Improve performance to reach targets across all clinical urgency categories for elective surgery waiting times and emergency access waiting times.

Employment

8. Remove age restrictions for access to workers' compensation through WorkCover.
9. Develop a mature age jobseeker assistance program which focuses on assisting and supporting people into employment and emphasises new opportunities and prospects for a person's life.

Social Welfare

10. Maintain a confidential data base on individual experiences of elder abuse through data collected from the NSW Elder Abuse Helpline to improve and progress knowledge on elder abuse, advance services and target policies for prevention and education.
11. Increase funding for the Tenants' Advice and Advocacy Program so older, vulnerable renters in New South Wales have adequate access to tenant advocacy services.

Cost of Living

12. Ensure that Commonwealth funded senior and pensioner supplements assessed at the discretion of the State reach the recipient in full and are not subject to income assessments for public housing rent.
13. Increase the \$250 Local Council Rebate in line with inflation.

Introduction

National Seniors' New South Wales Policy Advisory Group plays a key role in identifying emerging issues and trends affecting the over-50s throughout the State. It also acts as a conduit between National Seniors' members within the State, relevant community organisations, and the New South Wales government.

Australia's ageing population - a result of increasing life expectancy and sustained low fertility following the post-war baby boom - is one of the most significant challenges facing the nation. We must make a conscious effort to plan and structure our cities to ensure liveability and non-discrimination.

According to the 2011 Census, there were three million people aged 65 years and older living in Australia. Over half of this population were aged 65–74 years. The post-war Baby Boomers are now beginning to enter the older age group (65 years and over) and will continue to increase its relative size.

By 2030, the largest age group will be those aged 60 years and older and one in five Australians will be aged over 60. The number of people aged 65 and over will be almost double what it is today and the number of people aged 85 and over will be almost three times larger than today.

At present, the ratio of workers to retirees is 5:1. In 2030 it will be 3:1. Beyond 2030, population ageing will be even more pronounced with around 39% of the population being aged 50 and older by 2050.

Furthermore, the New South Wales population is projected to grow at all ages between 2011 and 2031. The age groups that are projected to grow the most by 2031 are among those aged 65 years and older with the aged dependency ratio increasing from 0.30 in 2011 to 0.33 in 2031¹.

The New South Wales government must recognise that the over-50s are a diverse segment of the State's population. At the younger end of the spectrum the growth in the 'baby boomer' population is bringing new issues and expectations of retirement, replacing the traditional view of 'dependency and decline' with one of independence and increased productivity.

Additionally, increased life expectancies are supporting marked growth in the numbers of people aged 75 and older.

¹ Department of Planning and Infrastructure (2013) *New South Wales in the future: Preliminary 2013 population projections. Preliminary release of NSW state and local government area population projections.* Sydney: Department of Planning & Infrastructure.

Older Australians are a diverse group with varying needs and requirements to live a healthy and comfortable life. National Seniors' State budget submission therefore seeks to outline those areas which are the key to enhancing the health, well-being and inclusion of older people in New South Wales. The budget submission also seeks to respond to rising demands for essential services and cost of living pressures.

According to the Australian Electoral Commission, there are 2,295,416 people aged 50 and older in New South Wales enrolled to vote. This constitutes 47.5% of all enrolled votes in New South Wales. Thus, this age group will constitute a significant proportion of the vote at the upcoming election in 2015.

Government leadership is critical to meeting the challenges posed by these demographic changes.

Making decisions on ageing now will greatly assist the State's readiness to cope with an ageing population into the future.

Housing

Recommendation 1: Ensure that older people in New South Wales, who reside in public housing with vacant bedrooms, are given the option to move into a more suitable residence that is relevant to their current and future needs before the vacant bedroom charge is applied to their fortnightly rent.

National Seniors is concerned that single and couple pensioners and other people aged over 50 on low-incomes will bear higher costs or be forced to move house under the newly formed 'vacant bedroom charge'.

National Seniors believes that any vulnerable people over 50, who are willing or who are requested to relocate, should be assisted by the New South Wales government to ensure that they are able to move into appropriate and secure housing in the same general location as they currently reside.

Recommendation 2: Reinstate the Senior's Principal Place of Residence Duty Exemption for older people in New South Wales who want to downsize their home.

National Seniors research shows that two in three Australians relocate between the ages of 55 and 75 and that in many cases older adults are compelled to make decisions to either reside within their current home or to move due to various factors such the demands of home maintenance and everyday costs during retirement².

Our research has also found that many individuals who choose to remain in their own home as they age are influenced by financial concerns and the large costs of relocating – with stamp duty being a major impediment.

People aged over 50 and concessioners residing in Victoria and the Northern Territory are eligible for stamp duty relief to assist in relocating to accommodation that is more suited to their needs (e.g. from a house to a townhouse).

² Source: National Seniors. 2012. *Where will I live as I age? Senior Australians' needs and concerns about future housing and living arrangements*. Brisbane

Older residents in New South Wales feel they have not shared in stamp duty relief in recent years, which has primarily targeted businesses and first home buyers.

National Seniors believes that a one off concession on stamp duty targeted at older residents in New South Wales, who are reluctant to downsize due to the costs associated with relocating, provides an opportunity to assist them in moving to more suitable accommodation and also increases the availability of housing in the state.

Social Inclusion

Recommendation 3: Develop age friendly city and community guidelines relevant to the local context and utilise community groups, such as National Seniors, to assist in implementing the guidelines.

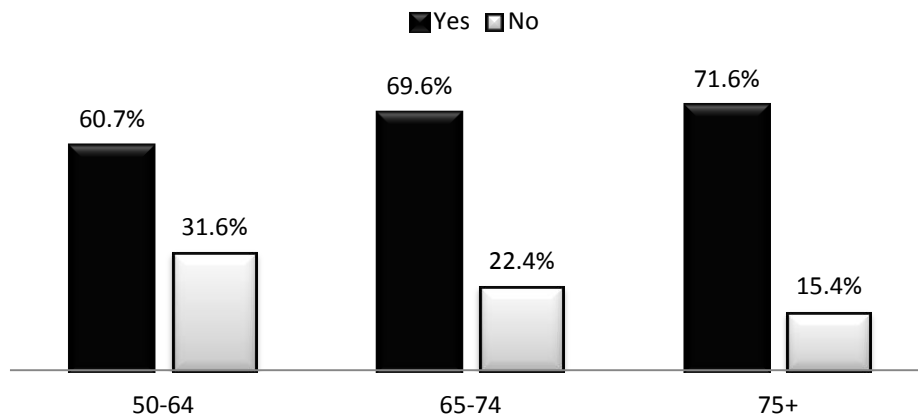
National Seniors supports initiatives to promote age friendly cities and communities, with a range of cultural and recreational opportunities for citizens of all ages. This will result in the provision of spaces and opportunities for people to interact, feel safe and contribute in a meaningful way to their community.

An age-friendly city is one where the physical and social environments are designed to support and enable people to age actively and participate fully in society. Elements of an age friendly city include; non-slip pathways, universal housing, maintained green space, adequate seating and well-connected public transport systems.

Furthermore, our research shows that 36% of over 50s live in a home that is not suitable for ageing. Only 38% of over 50s have taken steps to prepare themselves for getting older³.

³National Seniors. 2012. *Where will I live as I age? Senior Australians' needs and concerns about future housing and living arrangements*. Brisbane

Intentions to Age at Home



Source: National Seniors. 2012. *Where will I live as I age? Senior Australians' needs and concerns about future housing and living arrangements*. Brisbane

Recommendation 4: Continue to provide information in print, by telephone, and in person to older people in New South Wales in collaboration with organisations such as National Seniors Australia.

Government agencies increasingly communicate with clients electronically. It is important to recognise that a significant minority of those aged 65 and older are not yet comfortable with computers and other digital technology.

For people aged 65 years and older, the level of participation or access to the internet is still markedly low at only 37%⁴.

Therefore, information needs to be provided in print and by telephone, not just online.

Health

Recommendation 5: Improve hospital discharge procedures for people who live alone or without access to support, by ensuring that links are made to relevant services before patients are sent home.

Recommendation 6: Support health maintenance programs such as hydrotherapy and tai chi which improve mobility and balance.

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). 2011. *Australian Social Trends: Online at Home*. Australian Government: Canberra.

Although the *NSW Ageing Strategy* includes a section on keeping people healthy and out of hospital, no new programs appear to be listed. We support existing programs such as falls prevention and dementia awareness, and urge the health sector to form partnerships with local government and Sport and Recreation in encouraging active lifestyles, good nutrition and other health maintenance initiatives for the over 50s in New South Wales.

Health prevention strategies reduce overall health spending – local budget constraints should not override general budget benefits. One instance is the hydrotherapy service at Prince of Wales Hospital, currently under threat. Hydrotherapy is a vital service for older people who will become a real drain on the health budget if they present to emergency departments with falls, broken limbs and other health crises.

People who live alone should not be sent home unsupported when they are still too frail to manage shopping and self-care. The recently introduced Hospital in the Home (HITH) services are a step in the right direction but many service gaps remain. The transition care programs provide an example of how integrated service planning can support older people to rehabilitate and return to independent living in their homes rather than enter residential aged care prematurely.

When services such as community transport are rationed, social needs are given low priority compared to medical appointments. As important as access to doctors and hospitals is, social inclusion entails a wider range of community activities. *Healthy Living Better Ageing* depends on a secure network of friends and community contacts in addition to family.

Recommendation 7: Continue to improve performance to reach targets across all clinical urgency categories for elective surgery waiting times and emergency access waiting times.

As reported by The Bureau of Health Information Hospital⁵, during July through to September 2013, 65 per cent of patients waited no longer

⁵ Bureau of Health Information. 2013. *Emergency Departments Hospital Quarterly: Performance of NSW public hospitals July to September 2013*. Available at http://www.bhi.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/204779/HQ14_EmergencyDepartment_Jul-Sep2013.pdf

than four hours in emergency, up from 58 per cent from the same time in 2012 - but still below the State's target of 71 per cent.

National Seniors applauds this achievement. However, we note that the Emergency Access Target for New South Wales of 65 per cent is relatively low when compared to that reached by Western Australia (78.5%) in 2012⁶ and Queensland (77%) in November 2013⁷.

For New South Wales to meet targets by the end of the year, 100 per cent of urgent patients, 93 per cent of semi-urgent, and 95 per cent of non-urgent patients must be treated on time.

The New South Wales government needs to ensure improved performance to reach targets across all clinical urgency categories for elective surgery waiting times and increase the baseline target for emergency admission, referral or discharge under the *National Partnership Agreement on Improving Public Hospitals* in 2014 to reach 90% by 2015.

Employment

Recommendation 8: Remove age restrictions for access to workers compensation through *WorkCover*.

Action is required on outstanding New South Wales issues:

- Workers' compensation is only conditional for those aged 65 and older, and
- Employment insurance is subject to limitations for those aged 65 and older.

National Seniors believes the barriers to mature workforce participation can be overcome by the government improving the mix of education, awareness, incentives and support including the removal of the age limits on workers compensation schemes. Currently, Queensland and Western Australia have no age cap on their workers compensation schemes.

⁶ COAG Reform Council 2013, *National Partnership Agreement on Improving Public Hospital Services: 2012 Assessment of Performance*, COAG Reform Council, Sydney.

⁷ Queensland Government. 2013. *Monthly emergency department information for November 2013*. Available at <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/hospitalperformance/ed-main.aspx?hospital=99999>

In addition, we note that the NSW Ageing Strategy recommends: “review the impact of current laws and insurance regimes, including Workcover, on workforce participation.”⁸

We regard this review as a high priority.

Recommendation 9: Develop a mature age jobseeker assistance program which focuses on assisting and supporting people into employment and emphasizes positive new opportunities and prospects for a person’s life.

National Seniors applauds the New South Wales government plan titled *NSW 2021: A Plan to Make NSW Number One*. This 10 year plan proposes to rebuild the economy, provide quality services, renovate infrastructure, restore government accountability, and strengthen local environments and communities.

National Seniors recommends that to successfully increase participation of people aged 55 and older, as stated as a target under Goal One, it is crucial that the New South Wales government implement a program that aims to improve career development opportunities for mature aged people across New South Wales.

We recommend forming and implementing a program similar to Western Australia’s ‘Profit from Experience’ initiative.

This program aims to improve career development opportunities for mature aged people across Western Australia.

Through individual guidance, the program assists people aged 40 and older (or 35 plus for Indigenous clients) with:

- Career guidance and action planning;
- Access to accredited training opportunities;
- Recognition of current competencies;
- Emphasising the value of work experience;
- Improving skills in overcoming impediments to obtaining employment; and
- Other training opportunities

We recommend tailored assistance relevant to the conditions of the current labour market in New South Wales to provide awareness of the most current employment opportunities and limitations.

⁸ Department of Family and Community Services Office for Ageing. 2012. NSW Ageing Strategy. New South Wales Government: Sydney

Such a program should focus on an individual's needs and aim to help older job seekers in New South Wales to gain the skills needed to manage their own careers, achieve their own career goals and reinvigorate personal interests.

The initiative formed by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) titled 'Life Reimagined' provides a suitable platform on which to build mature age employment programs in New South Wales.

Social Welfare

Recommendation 10: Maintain a confidential data base on individual experiences of elder abuse through data collected from the NSW Elder Abuse Helpline to improve and progress knowledge on elder abuse to advance services and target policies for prevention and education on elder abuse.

Many older people are fearful of asserting their rights with family and friends on whom they may rely for physical and social support. It is therefore essential that the calls to the Hotline are monitored to provide guidance on strategies that will reduce the vulnerability of older people.

Recommendation 11: Increase funding for the Tenants' Advice and Advocacy Program so older, vulnerable renters in New South Wales have adequate access to tenant advocacy services.

The restructure of the Tenants' Advice and Advocacy Program has led to the discontinuation of funding (worth \$414,700 per annum combined) for the Older Persons Tenants' Service (OPTS).

The Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association in NSW conclude within a comprehensive evaluation of the OPTS that this program was fully meeting and exceeding its funding obligations in all areas:

"Their activities exceed the basic provision of service under these obligations in some key areas of service reviewed, particularly direct casework, the production of resources and policy activities"⁹.

In 2011, older renters in NSW were generally in receipt of low incomes, living alone and spending upwards of 30% and even 50% of their income on rent⁵. OPTS provided older renters with protection and the need for

⁹ Stubs, J. 2012. OPTS Evaluation. Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association: NSW.

this service shows no signs of decline, especially considering the growth and ageing of the NSW population over time.

Cost of Living

Recommendation 12: Ensure that Commonwealth funded senior and pensioner supplements assessed at the discretion of the State reach the recipient in full and are not subject to income assessments for public housing rent.

The risk of living in poverty and experiencing social exclusion later in life increases if a person does not own his or her home. The costs of private rentals and the long waiting periods for public housing adversely affect older people on low and/or fixed incomes.

Housing affordability depends upon availability, accessibility and supply. Thus “lower-income, older renters, particularly private renters, continue to be a relatively disadvantaged group in terms of housing affordability, security and quality”¹⁰. This issue is further exacerbated by the ageing population on low incomes who require rental properties to cater to a diverse range of housing needs.

Therefore, the affordability of non-owner-occupied housing, the availability of public housing and the adequacy or suitability of housing to meet a person’s needs are of major concern to National Seniors.

Government priorities must include providing access to housing for those older people in New South Wales who do not have secure tenure later in life, especially for those heading into retirement.

The Commonwealth recommends that the States and Territories do not assess additional government income supplements as income for public housing rents. National Seniors is aware that the New South Wales Department of Housing is currently assessing the clean energy supplement as income and many members in New South Wales have raised the impact that this is having on their daily costs of living – with specific regard to the costs of electricity bills and other daily essentials.

¹⁰ AHURI. 2007. *Rental housing provision for lower-income older Australians*. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute: Queensland Research Centre.

Therefore, National Seniors is calling on the New South Wales government to permanently quarantine the clean energy supplement when calculating public housing rents.

We also ask the New South Wales government to exclude the supplement from public housing rent once the Carbon Tax is fully repealed. We recommend that the New South Wales government extend the same support for low income earners as that shown by the Federal government in retaining the supplement.

Recommendation 13: Increase the \$250 Local Council Rebate in line with inflation.

The rising cost of living pressures, including prices of electricity, gas, petrol, groceries, council rates, transport and health services continue to cause anxiety for older people, especially pensioners on fixed incomes.

We urge governments at all levels to work with power companies to control escalating power bills, currently a source of anxiety in many households.

National Seniors recommends that government rebates and financial assistance be increased to match the rapid increases in electricity charges, including any additional charges.

The \$250 rebate on local council bills has remained the same since 1993. In that time, the rebate has lost more than half its value in real terms, increasing hardship for pensioners.

Accounting for inflation between 1993 and 2013, this rebate requires an increase from \$250 per annum to \$414.55 per annum.

National Seniors supports an increase in this rebate in line with inflation.