OPAN | Older Persons Advocacy Network

Climate change and older people

Background paper

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This paper explains the evidence and policy context behind OPAN's position that climate change is an aged care issue. It considers impacts on health, care continuity, equity, gender, the workforce and system funding, and the action needed across aged care.

Key messages

- **Climate change is already affecting older people.** Older people in Australia are experiencing climate-related risks through extreme heat, bushfire smoke, floods, storms, service disruption, housing stress, rising energy and food costs, and changing patterns of disease.

- **This is a rights issue.** Climate change can undermine older people's rights to safety, health, dignity, autonomy, housing, food, water, mobility, culture, information, participation and non-discrimination.

- **Risk is not caused by age alone.** Climate risk is intensified by poverty, insecure or poor-quality housing, gender, disability, cognitive impairment, chronic illness, social isolation, racism, language barriers, rurality, remoteness, digital exclusion and limited access to transport and services.

- **Aged care must move beyond emergency response.** Current policy settings need to shift from reactive disaster response to prevention, preparedness, adaptation, mitigation and recovery across in-home, community and residential aged care.

- **Costs must not be shifted to older people.** Climate resilience and sustainability investments should be publicly planned, transparently funded and supported through grants, procurement and regulatory settings, not passed on to older people through higher contributions, add-on fees or reduced services.

- **Older people must be involved in decisions.** Climate policy, disaster preparedness, emergency communications and aged care reform must be co-designed with older people, including older First Nations people, people with disability and dementia, carers, families, representatives and advocacy organisations.

- **Sustainable aged care is quality aged care.** Climate-safe buildings, reliable care continuity, workforce protection, safe transport, sustainable procurement, waste reduction and emissions reduction are all part of a safe, high-quality aged care system.

- **System leadership is essential.** Governments, regulators and providers must have clear responsibilities, practical guidance, funded implementation pathways and transparent accountability for climate resilience in aged care.

Why this matters

Climate change is already affecting people in Australia. The Australian Government's National Climate Risk Assessment identifies escalating risks across health and social support, infrastructure and the built environment, food systems, water security, supply chains, coastal communities and governance. It also recognises nationally significant risks for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. [1]

The Australian Government's National Health and Climate Strategy recognises the need to build a climate-resilient health system and to decarbonise the health system. It also identifies aged care emergency preparedness, quality standards and aged care accommodation as specific areas requiring attention. [2]

For OPAN, the policy imperative is clear: climate resilience and sustainability must be embedded in aged care reform. Aged care must protect older people from avoidable harm, support autonomy and choice, and maintain continuity of care before, during and after climate-related events.

The new rights-based Aged Care Act puts older people at the centre of the aged care system, including through a Statement of Rights and a Statement of Principles. Those principles include that the aged care system should be sustainable and resilient. [3] [4] A climate-safe aged care system is therefore not optional or separate from reform. It is part of realising rights in practice.

OPAN's position

OPAN supports urgent, coordinated and properly funded action to build a climate-resilient and sustainable aged care system. This requires action across law, policy, funding, regulation, commissioning, workforce planning, housing, emergency management, provider governance and community infrastructure.

OPAN's position is that:

1. **Climate change must be recognised as an aged care reform issue,** not only as an environmental or emergency management issue.

2. **The rights, preferences and voices of older people must guide the response,** including older people who receive care at home, live in residential aged care, use community services, or are not yet connected to aged care.

3. **Governments must lead and resource the transition,** using funding, regulation, procurement and infrastructure levers to support providers and communities to act.

4. **Climate resilience must be embedded in quality and safety,** including environmental risk management, disaster preparedness, continuity of care, infection prevention, medication safety, food and water security, and workforce safety.

5. **Equity must be central,** with targeted action for older people most exposed to climate-related harm and least able to adapt without support.

6. **Older people should not bear the cost of system adaptation,** and sustainability must not be used to justify higher fees, service rationing or poorer access to care.

7. **Aged care must reduce avoidable emissions and waste,** while protecting care quality, workforce conditions, consumer choice and affordability.

8. **Climate action must respect First Nations leadership and knowledge,** including the relationship between health, culture, Country, community and intergenerational responsibility.

How climate change affects older people

Older people are not a homogenous group. Some older people are highly resilient, connected and resourced. Others face layered risks because of health, housing, income, geography, discrimination or care needs. Climate policy should avoid ageist assumptions that present older people only as vulnerable or passive. It should recognise both the rights of older people to protection and support, and the contributions older people make to families, communities, culture, volunteering, caring, emergency preparedness and local knowledge.

Health and wellbeing

Extreme heat is a major and growing risk. The Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission has warned that people over 65 are at highest risk from heat, and that heat-related illness can worsen rapidly in older people, particularly for people with dementia, mobility issues, frailty, diabetes, kidney disease, heart disease or medication-related hydration risks. [5]

Climate change can also increase exposure to bushfire smoke, poor air quality, floods, storm damage, allergens, food- and water-borne disease, vector-borne disease, injury and mental health impacts. It can disrupt routines, relationships and supports that older people rely on to remain safe and well.

Care continuity and access

Climate-related events can disrupt home care visits, transport, meals, medication supply, assistive technology, allied health, nursing, personal care, cleaning, social support, respite, advocacy and informal care. These disruptions can lead to rapid deterioration, hospital presentations, carer distress and premature entry into residential aged care.

Continuity of care is especially important for people with complex needs, people living alone, people with cognitive impairment, people receiving palliative care, people who rely on electricity-dependent equipment, and people whose support networks are also affected by disaster.

Housing, energy and the built environment

Many older people live in homes that are not climate-safe. Poor insulation, inadequate cooling or heating, inaccessible design, insecure tenancy, high energy costs and limited ability to make home modifications can make it harder to stay safe during heatwaves, smoke events, floods, storms and power outages. Housing and energy insecurity can force older people to choose between cooling, heating, food, medication and care.

Residential aged care homes also need to be designed and managed for climate risks. Safe aged care environments require thermal comfort, ventilation, air filtration, shade, water security, backup power, infection prevention, accessible outdoor spaces, evacuation planning and clear communication with residents, families, carers and supporters.

Economic, social and cultural impacts

Climate change can increase the cost of food, energy, insurance, transport and housing. These pressures can disproportionately affect older people on fixed or low incomes, renters, older people who live alone, older people in regional, rural and remote areas, and people who are already experiencing hardship.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people, climate change affects Country, culture, kinship, community wellbeing, intergenerational responsibilities, cultural practices, food and water systems, and the health of land and waters. Responses must be led by and developed with First Nations people, recognise the authority and leadership of Elders, support community-controlled approaches where possible, and avoid imposing one-size-fits-all models.

Care at home and in the community

Many older people rely on regular home-care visits, meals, personal care, medication support, assistive equipment, transport or social contact. If a visit is cancelled, a worker cannot reach a person, or equipment and power are unavailable, the older person may be left without support they need to stay safe. Delays can affect health, independence and connection to the community.

Home-care providers may have fewer opportunities to check on a person than residential providers. The Commission's heat guidance notes that home environments

differ and that workers may visit only once or a few times a day. Providers therefore need individual heat and emergency plans, clear contact arrangements and ways to check on people when normal visits cannot occur [5].

Service continuity plans should identify who may need extra help, who is responsible for checking in, how missed visits will be followed up, and what backup arrangements are available for medicines, food, water, equipment, transport and urgent escalation. Older people should be told what is happening and how to contact the service.

Residential aged care

Residential services need to maintain safe temperatures and air quality, water, power, communications, essential supplies and staffing during an emergency. Residents may need individual arrangements for medicines, mobility, communication, evacuation or sheltering in place. Plans must account for the effect of disrupted transport, supply chains and staff availability, and be practised with residents and workers.

Emergency preparation should also protect residents' rights, dignity and choices. Residents and their chosen supporters need accessible information about what will happen, how decisions will be made and how they will stay connected to family, community and advocates during a disruption.

Older people in all their diversity

Age alone does not determine a person's exposure to climate-related risks or their ability to prepare, adapt and recover. Health, disability, income, housing quality, location, transport, language, access to information, social connection and discrimination all influence how people experience and respond to these risks. Reliance on daily services, powered equipment or a particular worker or transport route can increase the consequences of disruption.

Older people are not a single vulnerable group. Many have knowledge, relationships and resources that support preparedness and recovery. Climate plans should recognise older people's agency and expertise, provide accessible information, support decision-making and include older people in the design, testing and review of arrangements.

Women make up the majority of the aged care workforce and of people using home care or residential care. In 2024, 87% of more than 21,000 surveyed aged care workers

were female [6]. At 30 June 2025, women accounted for 66% of people using home care and permanent residential care [7].

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people, climate impacts can affect Country, culture, kinship and community wellbeing. The National Climate Risk Assessment and National Adaptation Plan recognise the distinct impacts on First Nations peoples. Adaptation should respect self-determination and cultural authority and support community-led planning and recovery.

Actions should be place-based, culturally safe, trauma-informed and accessible. Emergency information should be available in plain English, Easy Read, translated formats, audio, Auslan and non-digital channels. Digital alerts and web-based information must not be the only pathway to life-saving information.

A climate-resilient aged care system looks like

A climate-resilient aged care system will protect older people before, during and after climate-related events and reduce the sector's own contribution to climate harm. The following features describe what older people, workers and communities will experience when climate resilience is embedded in aged care policy, funding, regulation and service delivery.

1. Older people will exercise their rights and participate in decisions

Older people will be involved in decisions about climate risk and emergency planning that affect them. They will have accessible information and support to make decisions, exercise choice and control, maintain privacy and cultural safety, stay connected with community, and raise concerns without reprisal. They will participate meaningfully in disaster preparedness, response and recovery and receive information and warnings through diverse, accessible communication channels, consistent with the recommendations of the UN Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons. [8]

2. Older people will receive continuous care at home and in the community

Older people will continue to receive essential home and community care during heatwaves, bushfires, smoke events, floods, storms, transport disruptions and power outages. Providers will use local climate risk plans to prioritise people at greatest risk, communicate with older people and supporters, respond to missed services, maintain medication and equipment contingencies, and provide referral pathways for urgent concerns.

3. Residents will live in climate-safe aged care homes

Residential aged care homes will have the infrastructure, staffing, equipment and governance to keep residents safe. Providers will maintain local heat and disaster plans, safe indoor temperatures, air quality management, backup power and emergency supplies. They will use evacuation and shelter-in-place protocols, resident-specific plans, staff training and drills, and clear communication protocols that respect residents' rights and preferences.

4. Older people will have climate-safe housing and energy security

Older people will have affordable, accessible and climate-safe housing. Those at greatest risk will have access to home modifications, assistive technology, energy efficiency upgrades and safe cooling or heating. Policies will protect older people from having to manage the costs of adaptation alone.

5. Workers and advocates will have the skills and support to respond safely

Aged care workers and advocates will have training, guidance and safe work systems to identify and respond to climate-related risks. Workforce planning will account for heat stress, transport disruption, increased care needs, surge demand, staff shortages, psychosocial hazards and the impact of disasters on workers and their families.

6. Providers will reduce emissions and waste while protecting care quality

Aged care providers will have support to reduce emissions and waste through energy efficiency, renewable energy, low-emissions transport, sustainable procurement, food waste reduction, responsible medication and continence product management, and environmentally sustainable buildings. These changes will improve care quality, affordability and sustainability together.

7. Data and accountability will drive safer care

Governments and regulators will collect and use data to understand climate-related risks to older people and aged care services. They will disaggregate data by age, sex, disability, location, housing, care setting and other relevant characteristics, while respecting privacy and cultural governance. They will use complaints, advocacy data and provider incident reporting to identify systemic risks and prevent avoidable harm.

To enable a climate-resilient aged care system, governments and the aged care sector must:

Australian Government

1. **Develop a dedicated aged care climate resilience action plan** under the National Health and Climate Strategy and National Adaptation Plan, with clear responsibilities, timeframes, funding and accountability.

2. **Build on the climate resilience in aged care legislation, rules, quality standards guidance and provider obligations,** with practical, funded guidance on climate risk assessment, accessible emergency planning, individual support needs and continuity of care.

3. **Establish targeted grants and incentives** for climate-safe aged care infrastructure, home modifications, energy efficiency, renewable energy, backup power, ventilation, air filtration, heat adaptation, low-emissions transport and sustainable procurement.

4. **Protect older people from cost shifting** by ensuring climate resilience and sustainability costs are not passed on through higher user contributions, optional fees, reduced care minutes or reduced service availability.

5. **Fund accessible preparedness and recovery supports** including independent advocacy, local navigation, practical emergency planning resources and support for people who are socially isolated or digitally excluded.

6. **Require stronger data and reporting** on climate-related risks, service disruptions, complaints, incidents and outcomes for older people across residential and home-based aged care.

7. **Support aged care workforce capability** through training, guidance, WHS protections, surge planning and support for workers affected by climate-related emergencies.

8. **Include older people and their representatives in policy design** through structured consultation with older people, First Nations communities, carers, advocates, providers and local emergency management partners.

State, territory and local governments

1. **Strengthen local heatwave, bushfire, flood and storm preparedness** with specific actions for older people living at home, in residential aged care and in other congregate settings.

2. **Ensure emergency communications are accessible and multi-channel,** including phone, radio, printed materials, door knocking, community connectors, language services and disability-accessible formats.

3. **Invest in climate-resilient communities** including shaded public spaces, cooling centres, accessible transport, libraries and community hubs, safe footpaths, public toilets and locally available support during emergencies.

4. **Improve housing and tenancy protections** so older renters and people in social, public and community housing can access safe cooling, heating, insulation, repairs and disaster recovery support.

5. **Partner with First Nations communities** to support culturally safe, locally led climate adaptation and disaster planning.

Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission and other regulators

1. **Make climate-related risk part of routine quality oversight,** including environmental risk management, care continuity, heat preparedness, emergency planning and resident-specific safeguards.

2. **Use complaints, incident reports, audits and advocacy intelligence** to identify systemic climate-related risks and require corrective action before harm occurs.

3. **Publish practical guidance for providers and consumers** on climate-safe care, emergency preparedness, heat stress, smoke events, power outages, evacuation, communication and recovery.

4. **Ensure enforcement responses are proportionate but effective** where provider failures expose older people to avoidable climate-related harm.

Aged care providers

1. **Assess local climate risks and update plans annually,** including heat, smoke, flood, storm, cyclone, power outage, transport disruption, workforce disruption and supply chain risks.

2. **Develop individualised emergency and heat plans** for older people at higher risk, including people with dementia, disability, chronic illness, mobility limitations, communication needs, medication risks or electricity-dependent equipment.

3. **Maintain care continuity** with clear processes for missed visits, welfare checks, urgent escalation, medication supply, food and hydration, equipment, transport and communication with supporters.

4. **Train staff and volunteers** to identify and respond to heat stress, dehydration, smoke exposure, distress, evacuation needs, abuse risks and post-disaster trauma.

5. **Communicate clearly and accessibly** with older people, families, carers, supporters and advocates before, during and after climate-related events.

6. **Reduce emissions and waste** through energy, transport, procurement, food, water and waste strategies that do not compromise care quality or increase costs for older people.

7. **Be transparent with consumers** about climate preparedness, service disruption plans, environmental upgrades and any costs, ensuring older people are not pressured to pay for system responsibilities.

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OPAN member organisations by state or territory:

ADAAustralia – Your Aged and Disability Advocates

ADACAS Advocacy

Advocacy Tasmania – in your corner

Advocare – Empowering older people in WA

aras – Aged Rights Advocacy Service

CatholicCare NT

Darwin Community Legal Service

ERA Elder Rights Australia – Promoting the human rights of all older people

Seniors Rights Service

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