



Government of South Australia

SA Health

Hon Zoe Bettison MP
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Dear Minister,

Re: Ministerial Advisory Board on Ageing

In common with the chairs of other government boards and committees I received a letter from the Premier outlining his intention to abolish those boards and committees that could not present a compelling case to continue. As you know the Premier referred to technological change in the past decade as one of the driving forces behind his wish to reform the way in which government consults, along with a perception that increasingly constituents prefer a 'direct say' in government.

The Ministerial Advisory Board on Ageing met on 27 August to respond to the Premier's invitation to consider its future. We considered both the factors outlined in the Premier's letter, efficiency and independence; and an additional document outlining the assessment criteria suggested to Ministers wishing to make a case for exemption. Members had sought the views of their communities on the issues raised in the Premier's letter in advance of the meeting. The majority view expressed to the meeting was that the Board had provided a valuable service to government over both this and previous terms, and that there were several important reasons why this particular mechanism for consultation should be retained in the Ageing portfolio. These reasons are outlined below.

1. Efficiency

The Board brings together spokespeople from a wide range of sectors on four occasions each year. The sectors represented include Aboriginal communities, CALD communities, Veteran communities and regional communities. Expert advice is also provided to the Board by a senior academic researcher in the field, a notable food and catering expert and the Equal Opportunity Commissioner. Each of these members consults with his or her constituency on a regular basis (all unpaid), providing direct community input to policy and strategy development. The Office for the Ageing advises that the total cost of the Ageing Board is in the region of \$10,000 – a very modest sum for access to the wealth of knowledge and experience represented at the table. Attempting to replicate consultation across all of these sectors through direct consultation consultancies would require a budget far in excess of this sum and the Office for the Ageing is far too small to undertake regular consultation without assistance. The Board also ensures on-going feedback into government policy development, rather than feedback via ad hoc consultation.

2. Independence from government to ensure objectivity

The Office for the Ageing (OFTA) does an excellent job in developing policy and implementing strategy, but inevitably it needs to review its priorities and to test the applicability of its proposals to real consumers. It is sometimes difficult for those who develop programs to assess their limitations. The Ageing Board represents an important testing mechanism for OFTA before policies and strategies are released to the public, with a capacity to alert the administration to omissions, misconceptions, or gaps in service. The Board performed this function very effectively in working through draft forms of the recent ageing policy document *Prosperity through Longevity*, but also in commenting on other cross-government policies and strategies with an impact on ageing communities.

It has been suggested that OFTA might pursue an issues-based consultation process, accessing different expert opinion as required. It is the Board's view that this process already exists side by side with the Board. What the Board contributes is an independent capacity to raise issues directly from the sector outside those nominated by government – a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach to consultation. We believe this is a valuable contribution.

The Board also provides government with independent gravitas through its endorsement of important policies or strategies. This is an important signal to the community that government has consulted with an independent group of advisers who support its policy initiatives.

Assessment criteria

1. Commercial entity

N/A

2. Direct community or sectoral representation

The members on the Board whose brief is to consult with and represent the views of Aboriginal, CALD and regional communities spoke especially strongly in favour of retaining the Board, and against the proposed alternate mode of consulting via the online environment. They pointed out the following:

- Although digital access is improving within the ageing sector, access diminishes significantly with age and in relation to language, literacy and socio-economic status.
- While people may have access to a basic computer, many in these groups either cannot access or cannot afford the high bandwidth access required for routine online engagement.
- The elderly in general, older Aboriginal people, aged people from CALD backgrounds and the poor all stand to be disenfranchised in a consultation strategy based largely upon digital engagement. The present Board structure allows for direct consultation with these groups from within.
- The Board felt that there was a risk to government that applying the proposed engagement strategy to the ageing sector would further disenfranchise an already marginalised group.

- The present Ageing Board provides a sure mechanism for representation of this group at the highest policy and political level.

3. Negative impact on community confidence.

- Board members had sought the views of their communities on this matter specifically. They reported significant cynicism in the community about the proposed alternative strategy. The point made repeatedly was that people doubted any such consultation would be 'real'. This is expressed particularly forcibly within ageing groups who do not see online consultation as a realistic alternative for them.
- The proposed model has the inherent risk that consultation will be limited to issues identified as priorities by government or the administration, rather than those identified by the ageing community.
- Members also identified the risk that government's intention in abolishing boards would be misconstrued as an attempt to evade scrutiny, rather than a commitment to creating more transparent government processes. This opinion was expressed repeatedly to members in their consultations on this matter.

4. Legal or financial advantage

- The Board represents excellent value for money in providing access to expert advice and community views on a wide range of issues with a broad range of constituencies within the sector.

5. Any other compelling risk

There is a risk that government will be seen as being out of touch with the problems and anxieties of ordinary older South Australians and that it is more interested in listening to younger constituents.

I trust that you will find these comments useful in your deliberations. They are offered in a constructive spirit and in a desire to assist government to continue to progress with meaningful ageing policy development.

Yours sincerely,



Margaret Anderson
Chair, Ministerial Advisory Board on Ageing
South Australia

1 / 9 / 2014

cc. Premier, Hon Jay Weatherill

cc. Jeanette Walters, Manager Policy and Programs, Office for the Ageing, SA Health