



Submission to the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit

Inquiry into the Administration of the Age Pension

by

Older Women's Network NSW

Contact: ceo@ownnsw.org.au

www.ownnsw.org.au

Acknowledgement of Country

The Older Women's Network NSW acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we live and work across New South Wales. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded, and that the experiences of older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women must be understood in the context of ongoing dispossession, structural inequality, and resilience.

About the Older Women's Network NSW

The Older Women's Network NSW (OWN NSW) is a feminist, intersectional, member-led organisation that has advocated for the rights, dignity and wellbeing of older women across New South Wales for more than three decades. Our network spans community groups across the state, and our programs include Employment Pathways, which supports older women back into work, and Homes for Older Women (HOW), our housing program in the Blue Mountains funded by Homes NSW. We work daily with women whose lived realities sit behind every line of the Auditor-General's findings on the Age Pension.

This submission draws on what those women tell us, and on the published evidence about the systems they must navigate.

1. Why this matters: the Age Pension is not a benefit

OWN NSW welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry. We do so from a position of clarity about what the Age Pension is, and what it is not.

The Age Pension is widely treated in public discourse as a discretionary benefit. It is not. It is a foundational element of Australia's social contract, paid in recognition that a lifetime of paid work, unpaid care, taxation and community contribution does not, on its own, secure economic stability in later life. It is, in effect, a guaranteed minimum income for older Australians. The Inquiry must, in our view, begin from that premise. How a system is administered cannot be separated from what it is for.

That premise has consequences. If the Age Pension is a guarantee of income in later life, then administrative failures are not inconveniences. They are breaches of an obligation. The Australian National Audit Office has now established that the administration of the Age Pension is *partly effective*, with an estimated \$5 billion in payment inaccuracy across 2021–22 to 2023–24, including \$1.33 billion in underpayments to seniors who were entitled to higher amounts. Maximum phone wait times exceeded one hour on more than half (57.3 per cent) of days during the audit period, and seniors waited an average of 48 days for claims to be processed.¹ These are not abstract performance metrics. For an older woman without savings, an additional six weeks without income, or an unanswered hour on the phone, can be the difference between paying rent and losing her home.

OWN NSW supports the Auditor-General's findings. This submission does not duplicate them. Instead, we ask the Committee to consider what those findings mean for the people on the other end of the system, and what the data does not, and cannot, capture.

¹Australian National Audit Office, *Administration of the Age Pension*, Auditor-General Report No. 20 of 2025–26 (Canberra: ANAO, 27 January 2026), available at <https://www.anao.gov.au/work/performance-audit/administration-of-the-age-pension>.

2. The system rests on a housing assumption that no longer holds

The Age Pension is calibrated on an implicit assumption that older Australians will supplement their income with outright home ownership and accumulated savings. That assumption was always partial. It is now visibly breaking down.

Recent AIHW analysis confirms that home ownership rates among Australians aged 65 and over remain high, but the composition has shifted. Outright ownership has declined nationally from around 39 per cent of all households in 1999–2000 to 31 per cent in 2021, while the proportion of households still carrying a mortgage has risen from 32 per cent to 35 per cent over the same period.² Among older lone-person households – disproportionately women – around 22 per cent rent rather than own, and the gap between older couples and older single women in housing security is stark.³

These are not marginal shifts. They represent a structural change in how older Australians, and older women in particular, are housed. For those in private rental, the Age Pension is plainly inadequate. Anglicare Australia's 2026 Rental Affordability Snapshot, which surveyed 49,000 listings nationally on 14–15 March 2026, found that just 0.2 per cent of rentals were affordable for a single person on the Age Pension, and only 0.7 per cent for a couple on the Age Pension. In Anglicare's own words, most of these listings were rooms in share houses, not suitable long-term housing for older people.⁴ The system has not been recalibrated to reflect this. It still operates as though housing costs in older age are minimal, retirees enter retirement debt-free, and private rental is a small minority experience. None of those things is now reliably true.

The consequences fall hardest on older women. Specialist homelessness services assisted approximately 29,500 clients aged 55 and over in 2023–24, up from 27,300 the previous year, with women accounting for the larger share.⁵ OWN NSW's own report *It Could Be You: Female, Single, Older and Homeless* documents how housing insecurity in older age is rarely the result of a single event; it is the cumulative product of lower lifetime earnings, interrupted careers spent caring for others, divorce

²Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Home ownership and housing tenure, in Australia's Welfare 2025* (Canberra: AIHW, 2025), drawing on ABS Census 2021 and ABS Housing Occupancy and Costs.

³AIHW, *Older Australians: Housing and living arrangements* (Canberra: AIHW, 2024), available at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/older-people/older-australians/contents/housing-and-living-arrangements>.

⁴Anglicare Australia, *Rental Affordability Snapshot 2026* (Canberra: Anglicare Australia, April 2026), <https://www.anglicare.asn.au/research-advocacy/rental-affordability/>.

⁵AIHW, *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2023–24*, Older Clients chapter (Canberra: AIHW, 2025).

or widowhood, and a private rental market that has effectively priced out anyone living solely on the Age Pension.⁶

3. Language frames policy, and current language is doing harm

Overlaying the structural picture is a public narrative that frames older Australians on the Age Pension as “dependent,” as a “burden,” as part of a “silver tsunami”. We name this here because language is not neutral. It shapes the political tolerance for inadequacy and disrepair in the systems older people rely on. It permits a slow drift from entitlement to charity in how the pension is talked about, and from charity to suspicion in how it is administered.

The women OWN NSW works with built the institutions and economy on which this country still runs. Many spent decades in unpaid care work that was essential and economically invisible. Reliance on the Age Pension in older age is not a personal failure. It is the predictable outcome of how our economy has historically distributed paid work, superannuation, and assets along gendered lines. Describing the people who carried that work as “leaners” or as a “tsunami” is not just inaccurate. It is unjust, and it has policy consequences.

4. Administration without impact assessment is incomplete

The ANAO has made an observation that, in our view, should sit at the centre of this Inquiry: the Age Pension program is not evaluated for its impact on recipients. The Department of Social Services reports on payment accuracy and the proportion of senior Australians receiving income support, but does not evaluate the program’s impact as required by the *Social Security (Administration) Act 1999*.⁷

This is not a minor oversight. It is the central problem. The system measures whether payments are accurate, whether processing meets time targets, and whether compliance activities are functioning. It does not measure whether people can successfully navigate the system, whether delays cause financial harm, whether disengagement is rising, or whether particular cohorts are systematically disadvantaged. In effect, the system is assessed as an administrative mechanism, not as a lived experience. From an audit perspective, that gap is concerning. From the perspective of an older woman trying to keep her housing, it is the whole story.

5. “Change of circumstances” and the reality of life events

The Age Pension system is structured around the concept of “change of circumstances.” The death of a spouse, the onset of illness, a change in housing, a loss of income – from an administrative

⁶Older Women’s Network NSW, *It Could Be You: Female, Single, Older and Homeless* (Sydney: OWN NSW, 2018, with subsequent editions).

⁷ANAO, *Administration of the Age Pension*, Report No. 20 of 2025–26, findings on program oversight.

perspective, these are triggers for reassessment. From the perspective of the woman living through them, they are moments of crisis.

Australian research on widowhood is clear on this point. DiGiacomo and colleagues, in a longitudinal qualitative study of 21 community-dwelling Australian widows aged over 65, found that high administrative burden in the early bereavement period was – in the authors’ own framing – a defining feature of women’s grief, compounding vulnerability rather than easing it, and producing measurable financial and housing consequences.⁸ In our service experience, this aligns precisely with what we see: women who have not previously managed household finances, navigating a complex system at the moment of greatest grief and reduced capacity, while simultaneously absorbing a fall from couple-rate to single-rate income against unchanged housing costs.

In practice, a recently widowed woman is required to notify multiple agencies, understand new entitlements, provide documentation, respond to correspondence, and manage reduced income, all within a system that proceeds as though her capacity is unchanged. These life events are not, in any meaningful sense, discrete. They are layered onto existing realities of insecure housing, limited savings, social isolation, and increasingly, climate-related disruption. It is in this gap, between how life is actually lived and how it is administratively processed, that risk accumulates.

6. When delay and complexity become harm

The Auditor-General identifies extended claim processing times, prolonged phone wait times, increasing complaints, and complex procedures. The 48-day average wait for claims, and the more than one-in-two days on which maximum phone wait times exceeded an hour, are presented as performance issues.⁹ In practice, they have direct and immediate consequences.

A delay in accessing payments can mean the inability to meet rent or mortgage obligations, reliance on informal arrangements that are sometimes unsafe and a known risk factor for elder abuse, accumulation of debt at high interest, or disengagement from the system altogether. These risks are not evenly distributed. For women in private rental in metropolitan Sydney, even a short delay can result in arrears that are difficult to recover from. For women in regional and outer-metropolitan New South Wales, delays compound an already-thin local service environment.

Climate-related events now form a recurring feature of life in many parts of New South Wales. Floods, bushfires, and prolonged extreme weather are no longer rare disruptions. For older women they can

⁸Michelle DiGiacomo, Joanne Lewis, Jane Phillips, Marie Nolan and Patricia M. Davidson, “The Business of Death: A Qualitative Study of Financial Concerns of Widowed Older Women,” *BMC Women’s Health* 15, no. 36 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-015-0194-1>.

⁹ANAO, *Administration of the Age Pension*, Report No. 20 of 2025–26, findings on timeliness and engagement.

mean temporary or permanent displacement, loss of identity documentation, disruption to internet and telephone access, and a sudden cluster of unexpected costs. At precisely these moments, the system requires engagement that assumes continuity of access, documentation, and capacity. Long wait times and complex processes do not simply frustrate users; they filter them. Those with confidence, digital access, and informal support persist. Those without, often, do not. The current evaluation framework cannot see this filtering, because the system is not measured against it.

7. Digital access is not a neutral channel

The shift toward digital service delivery has been treated, in much of government, as if it were a simple change in channel. It is not. The 2025 Australian Digital Inclusion Index found that 66.5 per cent of Australians aged 75 and over are digitally excluded – the highest rate of any cohort tracked. People aged 65–74 sit roughly twelve points below the national average on the overall Index, and over-75s sit around 24 points below.¹⁰ Digital ability – the confidence and skill to use online systems – is the dimension on which older Australians are furthest behind, and on which improvement has been slowest.

Government-commissioned research on the Be Connected program, conducted by Swinburne University for the Department of Social Services, has found that older Australians experience persistent digital exclusion and that meaningful engagement with online services typically requires sustained, in-person, mentor-led support.¹¹ The ANAO confirms that Services Australia is aware of these barriers, but has not fully acted on the information it collects about senior recipients' experience.¹² The result is a structural inequity. Digital systems are not simply an alternative way to access the same service; they reshape who can access it at all.

8. Disasters expose the limits of the system

Natural disasters are perhaps the clearest illustration of how the Age Pension's administrative assumptions break down on contact with reality. Accessing payments after a disaster typically requires identity documentation, online access, and the capacity to navigate application processes. In practice,

¹⁰Julian Thomas, Indigo Holcombe-James, Kieran Hegarty et al., *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2025* (Melbourne: ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology and Telstra, 2025), <https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/>.

¹¹Jo Barraket et al., *Improving the Digital Inclusion of Older Australians: The Social Impact of Be Connected* (Melbourne: Swinburne University of Technology, commissioned by the Department of Social Services, 2020), <https://www.dss.gov.au/improving-digital-skills-older-australians/resource/evaluation-be-connected>.

¹²ANAO, *Administration of the Age Pension*, Report No. 20 of 2025–26, findings on Services Australia's engagement with seniors.

women affected by floods or bushfires may have lost documents, devices, internet access and housing within hours. Justice Connect, an accredited community legal centre, maintains a dedicated Disaster Legal Support resource hub specifically because the social security system as currently designed does not reach those most affected by disasters without intervention.¹³ Welfare Rights NSW and Economic Justice Australia operate parallel specialist legal advice services for the same reason.

The fact that an entire ecosystem of community legal centres, financial counsellors, and specialist advocates has emerged to make the system navigable is itself a finding. A system that requires parallel support structures to be usable, particularly in moments of crisis, is not, by any reasonable definition, fully effective.

9. CALD older women face compounded barriers the system does not see

Australia is a country built by migration, and a significant proportion of the women OWN NSW works with were not born here. Many arrived as young women in earlier waves of migration, raised families in languages other than English, spent decades in unpaid family and community care, and now find themselves in older age relying on the Age Pension as their primary source of income. The system they are required to navigate was not designed with them in mind, and the gap between what it assumes and what their lives look like is, in our experience, the widest of any cohort we work with.

The financial picture is sharper for older women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds than for the broader cohort. AIHW analysis of ABS data shows that among older Australians who mainly speak a language other than English at home and speak English well, 86 per cent could raise \$2,000 within a week in an emergency; among those who speak English not well or not at all, that figure falls to 74 per cent.¹⁴ A twelve-point gap in emergency financial resilience is, for an older woman in private rental, the difference between covering an unexpected bill and being unable to. That gap is also a near-perfect predictor of what happens when an Age Pension claim takes 48 days to process.

A recent peer-reviewed scoping review of barriers facing CALD older adults in Australia, drawing on Penchansky and Thomas's widely used "five A's" access framework, found that availability, accessibility, accommodation, affordability and acceptability of services all functioned as barriers, with the authors

¹³Justice Connect, *Centrelink, Social Security Payments and Disasters (NSW)*, Disaster Legal Support Resource Hub, last updated 14 March 2024, <https://justiceconnect.org.au/resources/centrelink-social-security-payments-and-disasters-nsw/>.

¹⁴Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Older Australians: Culturally and linguistically diverse older people* (Canberra: AIHW, 2024), drawing on AIHW analysis of ABS 2016 Personal Safety Survey data, available at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/older-people/older-australians/contents/population-groups-of-interest/culturally-linguistically-diverse-people>.

proposing a sixth dimension - awareness - to capture the systemic problem that many older CALD adults are not aware of the entitlements and services available to them in the first place.¹⁵ That finding maps onto what we see daily. An older woman who arrived in Australia in the 1970s, whose written English is limited and who has never used a computer, is not non-compliant when she fails to respond to a myGov letter. She is unreachable. Services Australia's multilingual phone line and translated written materials are necessary, but they are not sufficient. They presume that a person already knows the system exists, knows what to ask for, and trusts a government call centre enough to disclose her circumstances over the phone. For many older CALD women, none of those conditions hold.

The cultural dimensions matter as well. In many of the communities our network spans, financial matters were historically the domain of a husband or an adult son. The transition from couple-rate to single-rate Age Pension on widowhood is, for these women, not just an administrative reassessment but the first time in their lives they have been required to deal with a government agency directly, in writing, in English, about money. The system assumes a level of administrative practice that, for them, has never existed. The result is delay, error, disengagement, and - in the cases that come to us - housing crisis.

10. Older women are not a neutral cohort

The cohort that relies most heavily on the Age Pension is also the cohort least well served by how it is administered. Older women are more likely than older men to rely on the Age Pension as their primary income, to have lower superannuation balances and savings, to experience widowhood, to live alone, and to enter later life with cumulative economic disadvantage from interrupted paid work and unpaid care. They are also disproportionately represented among older Australians experiencing homelessness for the first time. Any system that assumes financial literacy, digital fluency, and administrative confidence will systematically disadvantage the people in our membership and our programs. That is not a hypothetical risk. It is the daily experience of the women OWN NSW supports.

11. Lived experience: where system design meets reality

The issues set out above are not theoretical. They are reflected in the experiences of the women we work with. A composite case, drawn from patterns across multiple women in our network and de-identified for privacy:

A woman in her early seventies, recently widowed, contacted our service after her Age Pension was reassessed from couple to single rate. Her rental costs in the private

¹⁵Anthony Obinna Iwuagwu, Abner Weng Cheong Poon and Elizabeth Fernandez, "A scoping review of barriers to accessing aged care services for older adults from culturally and linguistically diverse communities in Australia," *BMC Geriatrics* 24, no. 805 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12877-024-05373-8>.

market were unchanged. She had not previously managed the household finances and was unsure what she was entitled to or how to find out. She attempted to contact Services Australia multiple times and could not get through. She was not confident with the online system and had no one nearby to help. During this period she fell behind on rent and began considering leaving her home. There was no single point at which the system failed her. There were a dozen points at which it could have caught her, and did not.

Her experience reflects the cumulative effect of reduced income, rising housing costs, administrative complexity, limited access to support, and delayed engagement. None of these factors, taken individually, would register as a system failure on a current performance dashboard. Together, they are the shape of administrative harm.

12. What the Inquiry should recommend

OWN NSW respectfully urges the Committee to take forward the following recommendations, which build on rather than substitute for the Auditor-General's recommendations to the Department of Social Services and Services Australia.

(i) Measure impact, not just throughput

Performance reporting should include the lived experience of recipients, disaggregated by gender, age cohort, housing tenure, and remoteness. The Department of Social Services should report annually against the obligation in the Social Security (Administration) Act 1999 to evaluate program impact, including measures of accessibility, navigability, and disengagement.

(ii) Build life-event-aware service design

Bereavement, sudden illness, loss of housing, and disaster displacement are predictable patterns, not exceptions. The system should provide proactive, single-point-of-contact assistance during these events, including extended timeframes for documentation and a presumption that capacity is reduced. This should be co-designed with older women and the community sector that already supports them.

(iii) Maintain genuine non-digital access

Digital channels should be additional, not replacement. In-person and telephone channels must be staffed adequately enough that an older woman in private rental, recently widowed, can reach a human being without losing a day to it. The current performance metric for phone wait times is a floor, not a ceiling, and even that floor was breached on more than half of the days the ANAO reviewed.

(iv) Reach CALD older women on their terms, not the system's

Translated information and a multilingual phone line are necessary, but they assume a level of awareness and trust that does not exist for many older CALD women. Services Australia should fund and partner with multicultural community organisations and trusted bilingual workers to deliver

outreach, advocacy, and in-language assistance at the point of life events — bereavement, illness, change of housing — rather than waiting for women to find their way to a translated webpage. The “awareness” gap identified in the peer-reviewed evidence is not solved by translation alone; it is solved by relationships.

(v) Adequacy as well as administration

This Inquiry is properly focused on administration. We note, however, that no amount of administrative reform can compensate for a payment that sits below the cost of private rental in most of New South Wales. The Committee should formally acknowledge the connection between adequacy and administrative harm: when the rate is at or below subsistence, every administrative delay becomes a crisis.

(vi) Fund the bridges that already exist

Welfare Rights NSW, Economic Justice Australia, Justice Connect, and community organisations such as OWN NSW are currently bridging gaps that the system itself should not be producing. The reliance on this parallel infrastructure should be acknowledged in the Inquiry’s findings, and adequate, sustained funding should follow.

Conclusion

The Auditor-General has established that the administration of the Age Pension is not operating as it should. This submission makes a different point: the system is not only inefficient, it is misaligned with the realities of the people it serves. It treats life events as administrative updates, assumes capacity where there is often none, and measures accuracy without measuring accessibility. For older women, who built the country and now rely most heavily on this payment, that misalignment is not a technical issue. It is structural. If this Inquiry is to be meaningful, it must move beyond whether the system is functioning, and ask whether it is functioning for the people who rely on it most. At present, for too many of the women in our network, it is not.

Yumi Lee

Chief Executive Officer

Older Women’s Network NSW

ceo@ownnsw.org.au



Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit

Endorsement of the Older Women's Network NSW' Submission to the Inquiry into the Administration of the Age Pension

07.05.2026

To the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit,

The Working with Women Alliance (WwWA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's Inquiry. This letter does not duplicate, but rather, endorses the recommendations made in the Older Women's Network NSW' (OWN NSW) submission.

The WwWA provides this endorsement as a peak body on gender and economic inequality. We defer to our trusted member, OWN NSW – and their extensive membership, to supply expertise on older women's experiences of the Age Pension.

We support the premise that the Age Pension is not a discretionary benefit, but a foundational contract that provides economic security to older Australians – where their paid and unpaid work has not. Older women, particularly those who carry/ied unpaid care responsibilities, and who have low superannuation savings are disproportionately impacted by this.

We endorse the issues raised by OWN NSW, and draw particular attention to a number of social and environmental changes that have worsened economic insecurity for older people, particularly older women: The housing and cost-of-living crisis, the shift towards digitalisation, and the impact of environmental disasters.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide input and look forward to continued engagement on these important reforms.

Yours sincerely,

Gemma Killen

Executive Director

Working with Women Alliance

equality.policy@WwWA.org.au