

12 January 2023

Technology Assisted Voting review  
NSW Electoral Commission  
GPO Box 832  
SYDNEY  
NSW 2001

Carers NSW welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the NSW Electoral Commission review of technology assisted voting. This submission addresses the unique experiences of family and friend carers who actively support the democratic participation of the people they care for and will highlight the need for their inclusion within technology assisted voting options in NSW.

Carers NSW is the peak non-government organisation for carers in New South Wales (NSW). A carer is any individual who provides care and support to a family member or friend who has a disability, mental illness, drug and/or alcohol dependency, chronic condition, terminal illness or who is frail. Carers NSW is part of the National Carer Network and a member of Carers Australia. Our vision is an Australia that values and supports all carers, and our goals are to:

- Be a leading carer organisation in which carers have confidence
- Actively promote carer recognition and support
- Actively support carers to navigate a changing service landscape that will be characterised by ongoing policy reform
- Promote connected community experiences and opportunities for carers that are inclusive of diverse carer groups
- Lead and advocate for carer-specific and carer-inclusive policy making, research and service delivery
- Continue to be a quality-driven, responsive and carer-focused organisation.

Thank you for accepting our submission. For further information, please contact Grace Cherrington, Policy Officer at [gracec@carersnsw.org.au](mailto:gracec@carersnsw.org.au) or on (02) 9280 4744.

Yours sincerely,



Elena Katrakis  
CEO  
Carers NSW

## Introduction

Carers NSW believes that all citizens should enjoy their right to democratic participation and is supportive of policy and practice that seeks to ensure electoral processes are inclusive and accessible. The NSW Electoral Commission's (the Commission's) review of technology assisted voting options in NSW presents a timely opportunity to evaluate the efficacy of existing additional voting provisions and to highlight the ongoing need for a variety of voting options to be offered at both local and state elections.

This review also presents a unique opportunity to highlight the role of family and friend carers as supporters and advocates in the lives of the people they care for and how this care and support often extends into all domains of a person's life, including their democratic participation. While the review is centred on accessible voting options for select groups of people (in line with relevant legislation), including people with disability and people who are blind or with low vision, Carers NSW will also refer to carers who provide care to older people and those living with chronic health conditions throughout this submission. We will also put forward that family and friend carers more broadly should be considered a cohort of people with their own unique needs when participating in elections and as such, should have access to technology assisted voting.

### Carers as supporters and advocates

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2018 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC), indicates that there are approximately 854,300 carers in NSW. While care relationships are diverse, many carers in NSW support the person that they care for to make decisions. The Carers NSW 2022 National Carer Survey<sup>1</sup> (the Survey) found that approximately 83% of NSW respondents (N=1352) provided support with decision making and 90.4% provided support with cognitive tasks. Additionally, 73.6% provided support with communication, 16.7% with interpreting, 73% with advocacy and 91.5% with administrative tasks, all of which play a key role in making, executing and communicating decisions.

Carers NSW recognises the data collected in the Survey does not explicitly capture experiences associated with democratic participation. However, we believe this data provides insights into the level of support that many family members and friends may provide to the person they care for to enable them to engage in electoral processes, even when alternative voting options are available.

### Limitations of alternative voting options in isolation

International research on accessible voting highlights that while inclusive voting options are essential to improve democratic participation among citizens with disability, there are other important considerations that also affect engagement.<sup>2</sup> Digital literacy, access to technology and the perception as to whether voting options are accessible were also identified to be strong determinants of participating in electoral process.<sup>3</sup> While there is limited data on the experiences of people with disability and digital literacy in Australia, of the research that is available, people with disability report lower digital inclusion on the Australian Disability Inclusion Index compared to other Australians.<sup>4</sup> Further, a number of Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) programs funded through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) have focused on building the confidence and capacity of people with disability to engage in digitally based programs and services.

The lives of the carer and the person they care for are often closely connected. Alternative voting options are typically focused on the needs of the person being cared for however, their access can also be

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<sup>1</sup> Carers NSW (2022) *2022 National Carer Survey, unpublished data.*

<sup>2</sup> Schur, L., Shields, T., Kruse, D., & Schriener, K. (2002). Enabling Democracy: Disability and Voter Turnout. *Political Research Quarterly*, 55(1), 167–190. <https://doi.org/10.1177/106591290205500107>.

<sup>3</sup> Schur et al. (2002).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas, J., Barraket, J., Parkinson, S., Wilson, C., Holcombe-James, I., Kennedy, J., Mannell, K. & Brydon, A. (2021). *Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2021*. Melbourne: RMIT, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra.

impacted by the digital access and digital literacy of a carer. As noted in the 2019 Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) Discussion Paper on human rights and technology,<sup>5</sup> carers are over represented in groups with low rates of digital inclusion and face additional barriers to digital access such as affordability and lower levels of digital literacy. The 2018 SDAC also found that nationally, approximately 120,000 (15%) primary carers (the individual providing the most care to a person) reported that they had not used the internet in the last 3 months.<sup>6</sup> Of those primary carers, the most common reasons for not accessing the internet were that they have no need/no interest (74%), lack confidence/knowledge in accessing the internet (27%), can rely on friends/family to use the internet for them (13%) and no access to a computer or mobile technology (13%).<sup>7</sup>

While many people with disability and their carers will be able to access digital platforms effectively, those who have lower levels of digital inclusion, especially those with additional barriers such as those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, may have significant difficulty accessing the services and supports they need, even when alternative digital options may be available.

For carers of older family members or friends, similar issues may be experienced. Although government-funded initiatives such as Be Connected have successfully improved the digital skills of older Australians, digital literacy levels still vary, with older people who are less confident relying on family and friend carers to facilitate their access and engagement in services. In the context of aged care, the continued digitisation of services has had significant implications for many older people and their carers. Data from the 2020 National Carer Survey indicated that only one in three carers reported feeling confident finding information and accessing support online.<sup>8</sup>

It is clear that the availability of technology assisted voting in NSW elections will improve the engagement of people with additional access needs in electoral processes. However, to ensure optimal engagement among people with disability and others who may be eligible for these provisions, Carers NSW believes the Commission must understand the unique digital needs of people with disability and older Australians, as well as their carers and work collaboratively with disability, ageing and carer communities to support improvements in their digital literacy.

### Recognising carers in their own right

For many carers, especially those living with care recipients who have complex care needs, the caring role is a 24-hour, seven-day per week, year-round commitment that is relieved only occasionally by alternative care arrangements, provided either by friends and family or by formal services.<sup>9</sup> This can make it challenging for carers to participate in elections, especially if informal supports such as family and friends are unavailable due to their own voting needs or if formal services are more costly due to penalty rates incurred on Saturdays when NSW Elections are held. The Carers NSW 2022 National Carer Survey<sup>10</sup> found that approximately one in four respondents in NSW reported that the person they care for could not be left alone at any time. More than half however, did not receive any assistance with caring from family members or friends.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, just under 1 in 3 caring for someone accessing aged care services and just over 1 in 3 of those caring for someone accessing disability services identified that these services also did not provide them with a break from the caring role.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) (2019), *Human rights and technology: Discussion paper*, AHRC: Sydney.

<sup>6</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2019) *Survey of Ageing, Disability and Carers 2018*, TableBuilder Dataset. Australian Government, Canberra. Available online at: [www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au), viewed 05/03/2020.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Carers NSW (2020) *2020 National Carer Survey: Unpublished data*.

<sup>9</sup> Bellamy, J., Paleologos, Z., Kemp, B., Carter, S. & King, S. (2014) *Caring into Old Age: The wellbeing and support needs of parent carers of people with disabilities*, Anglicare Diocese of Sydney, Sydney.

<sup>10</sup> Carers NSW (2022).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

While aged care and social security legislation entitle some carers to replacement care or 'respite' from their caring role, beyond this official eligibility, carers' access to respite depends on the availability of timely, appropriate and affordable services. Increasingly, accessing these services can be very challenging for carers.<sup>13</sup> Ongoing workforce shortages and thin markets has meant respite needs continue to go on unmet, especially for carers based in regional and remote communities.

Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) states that all citizens should have the right and opportunity to vote at genuine periodic elections. When considering the ongoing barriers many carers experience when trying to secure replacement care that is suitable and safe for both themselves and the person they care for, it can be assumed that many carers may encounter difficulty when engaging in electoral process. Where appropriate replacement care cannot be sourced, it is not uncommon for carers to bring the person they care for with them to attend appointments or to postpone or cancel arrangements altogether. In contexts where the care recipient may qualify for alternative voting options such as iVote, there is the chance they may still need to accompany their family member or friend to a voting centre to enable them to vote. While Carers NSW acknowledges that some alternative voting arrangements are available to carers i.e. postal voting, we believe eligibility for all alternative voting arrangements should be expanded to include family and friend carers to ensure their optimal engagement in electoral process.

As well as key international legislation, Carers NSW wishes to highlight obligations under state-based legislation that the Commission has to recognise and include carers. Principles of the NSW *Carers (Recognition) Act 2010* (the Act) and NSW Carers Charter (the Charter) should be used by the Commission to guide their specific inclusion of carers in various provisions that aim to improve broad access and inclusion within electoral process. As outlined in Section 3a of the Charter, the diverse needs of carers should be acknowledged and recognised in policy, programs and service delivery, taking into consideration culture and language, age, disability, religion, socio-economic status, place of residence, gender identity and sexual orientation. As the Commission is a public service agency, Carers NSW encourages the abovementioned principles to be embedded in the development or revision of technology assisted voting options.

In addition to the *Carers (Recognition) Act 2010*, Carers NSW believes the Commission could use existing legislation to strengthen carers' rights to inclusive and accessible voting options. For example, the NSW *Anti-Discrimination Act 1977*, protects carers, or those providing care to dependents or associating with people with disability (including carers), against discrimination as a result of their caring role. Given the NSW *Anti-Discrimination Act 1977* is already embedded within the *Electoral Act 2017*, this could provide additional grounding for ensuring that accessible voting options are available to carers, limiting the possibility of discrimination against carers within voting processes.

## Conclusion

Carers NSW thanks the Commission for the opportunity to provide feedback on technology assisted voting options in NSW. Carers NSW recognises the ongoing commitment of the Commission to ensure voting options are accessible and inclusive for all members of the community. However, we believe that the important role of family and friend carers must be acknowledged and recognised, with carers supported in their own right to enable them to achieve optimal democratic participation.

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<sup>13</sup> Keesing, S., Rosenwax, L. & McNamara, B. (2011) 'Doubly deprived': a post-death qualitative study of primary carers of people who died in Western Australia, *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 19 (6): 636-644.