

8 March 2024

Aged Care Legislative Reform Committee
Department of Health and Aged Care
GPO Box 9848
Canberra ACT 2601

Via Email: AgedCareLegislativeReform@health.gov.au

Submission to Consultation on the new Aged Care Act

Lite n' Easy (LnE) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the exposure draft for the new Aged Care Act for consideration by the Department of Health and Aged Care.

Executive Summary

As a leading food provider to aged care recipients, LnE strongly supports the intent of the draft Aged Care Act which put older people who need aged care at the centre of the system. LnE currently supports more than 22,000 older Australians every week through the aged care system in regional and metropolitan areas across the country.

LnE welcomes the Act's intention to *"empower older people to exercise their rights when accessing, or seeking to access, Government-funded aged care services"* and *"support them to live active, self-determined and meaningful lives as they age."* This aligns with our core principles as an aged care provider.

A healthy diet is critical to health and wellbeing and should be a fundamental priority in aged care. Nutritious meals, and particularly ones that cater to the specific needs of an older person's dietary requirements, are important for prevention and management of numerous chronic illnesses, including Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and certain cancers¹.

More older Australians are opting to stay at home longer. The Government has made clear its priority to support expansion of At-Home care and provision of appropriate and expansive programs to support food delivery should be at the centre of this conversation. Preprepared and stable meals are crucial for those who live at home but no longer have the capacity to shop and or prepare their own meals for any reason.

The provision of accessible nutritious meals via programs such as LnE supports older Australians to maintain independence and control. It is vital that investment in high-quality food services continues to grow.

Consideration must also be given to the additional challenge older Australians living in remote areas face, and the complexity for high-quality service providers meeting the needs of these communities. Equity of access is of the utmost importance and there needs to be robust frameworks set up by the Government to help service providers to overcome barriers, and ensure older Australians retain the choice and dignity they deserve.

¹ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/older-people/older-australians/contents/health/behavioural-risk-factors>

Recommendations

1. The Australian Government supports older Australians to exercise individual choice, by ensuring they have access to dietician developed, nutritious meals that account for the individual personal preferences and the unique nutritional requirements of this age group.
2. The Australian Government continue and increase support measures for older Australians to stay at home for longer, if they chose to, by ensuring they can access the kinds of care they need: Ensuring access to nutritious meals, contributes to helping older people stay at home longer.
3. The Australian Government expand support for providers offering food related services in regional and remote communities: Quality equitable access needs to be prioritised.

Lite n' Easy in Aged Care

Since 1986 Lite n' Easy has provided Australians of all ages access to convenient but, importantly, quality nutritious meals. With all meals developed by our team of accredited practicing dieticians, we pride ourselves in creating great tasting meals, prepared by our expert chefs using freshest ingredients. We prepare these meals daily within our national network of 6 manufacturing facilities, comprised of more than 1,700 team members.

In 2020, Lite n' Easy identified a key barrier to independent living for older Australians was having the access and ability to cook their own quality nutritious meals. Responding to this need, Lite n' Easy created the *My Choice* product offering – a bespoke product range for older Australians. This range includes a large variety of meal options, catering for dietary requirements, the personal preferences and the differing but specific nutritional needs of older customers.

We strongly support the articulation of **high-quality care** (per Section 19) in the exposure draft, as our service prioritises the individual and their rights, including ensuring they can receive care in line with their preferences. LnE supports this through an extensive range of meals, and by allowing individuals to select their own packages.

One element the exposure draft links to being a key contributor to high quality care, is “*services that are culturally appropriate for the diverse life experiences of individuals*”. LnE has strong credentials in meal research, development and innovation in our product offering. It is critical that food services accommodate a wide range of palates, use of traditional ingredients and multicultural preferences, to ensure that older Australians can access food that reflects their preferences.

Recommendation 1: The Australian Government support older Australians to exercise individual choice, by ensuring they have access to dietician developed, nutritious meals that account for the individual personal preferences and the unique nutritional requirements of this age group.

As people age, their appetites typically decrease,² and whilst they may desire a smaller portion size, they also need additional protein. Protein rich foods assist older adults to maintain muscle mass whilst also controlling a healthy level of body fat. Muscle mass needs to be maintained as a person ages, and a rapid decrease can increase the risk of falls and make performing routine activities difficult.³

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4589891/>

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4162481/>

In addition, the Aged Care Quality Commission in their Standards⁴ identify that “*the significance of personal food preference does not diminish with age*” and “*Choice, including food choice, is fundamental to the Aged Care Quality Standards.*”

With these principles in mind, an aged care system which supports independent meal choice must be available. These meals should consider individual preference, but also accommodate the different nutritional needs of older Australians, cognisant of decreased appetite and additional protein requirements, in line with the standards they deserve.

Case Study 1: Betty, 83-year-old, QLD

Betty has been a customer of Lite n' Easy for almost a year and is still enjoying every meal. The meals have given her a good variety of beef, chicken, fish, lamb and pasta.

After a recent blood test, her doctor informed her that her blood was worth bottling. Each of the 47 tests came back normal – which she states was a first for her.

Betty is still living on her own and likes to be as independent as she can be. She has expressed that having her meals organised by Lite n' Easy with the support of her Home Care packages is a great help.

Read more on Betty's story: [Link here](#)

Recommendation 2: The Australian Government continue and increase support measures for older Australians to stay at home for longer, if they choose to, by ensuring they can access the kinds of care they need.

Ensuring access to nutritious meals, contributes to helping older people stay at home longer.

With more older Australians choosing to receive at home care, LnE's *My Choice* product offering helps to support them in a key area that may otherwise be the tipping point and could force them to move into residential aged care. Older Australians that access *My Choice* are empowered to live an independent lifestyle while being assured their dietary and access needs are accommodated in an easy and tailored way.

My Choice operates through the Home Care Package program, providing subsidised support. As noted in the exposure draft, the intention is to transition to the Support at Home program in mid-2025, Lite n' Easy recommends adequate funding is guaranteed and future-proofed, so that food and nutritional provision is maintained as a core component of aged care support.

A food service that eliminates the nutritional guesswork and time spent grocery shopping benefits older Australians who have changed mobility needs, as well as their formal and informal carers. This allows additional time to be spent on other care needs.

⁴ <https://www.agedcarequality.gov.au/providers/food-nutrition-dining/why-meals-matter#:~:text=The%20significance%20of%20personal%20food,of%20normality%20within%20RACs%2026>.

As the exposure draft identifies, supported decision making and acknowledging the diverse needs of older people needs to be at the centre of the system. The importance of balancing this right, with a system which accommodates healthcare needs is critical, and should be centralised in this Aged Care Act and all future reform. LnE's service represents the balance between these two important considerations.

Ensuring that support measures are instated which empower older people to access nutritious but also affordable food should be maintained and/or improved as the Government implements reform across the aged care sector.

Case Study 2: Joan and Keith, 85

Lite n' Easy was recommended to them by their doctor. The previous meal delivery service they used had to be supplemented with a shopping trip.

They have noticed with Lite n' Easy their stress levels are lower – and they don't have to constantly make decisions about what to eat.

They have enjoyed the ease of preparation and the variety that Lite n' Easy offers.

Read Joan and Keith's story: [Link here](#)

Recommendation 3: The Australian Government expand support for providers offering food related services in regional and remote communities.

Quality, equitable access needs to be prioritised

LnE is primarily a general population food service provider, however we have seen a significant uptick in demand from an aged care (and NDIS-access) cohort, as noted above.

Currently, LnE can deliver to 95.5% of the total Australian population. Whilst this is an impressive feat to achieve considering the remoteness of many Australian communities, there is still a percentage of the population that is currently unable to access our services.

Our original client base means that our service delivery approach has traditionally been driven by demand, but also commercial factors. However, as we increasingly step into the supported service space, we are acutely aware of the contribution we could make toward quality food-related services that are equitably accessible.

Subsidy from Government to support the additional logistic support needed to provide service to regional, rural, and remote areas is necessary, because the lack of service for these customers is a market failure that does not reflect equitable access.

Equitable access is one of the underpinnings of the rights-based legislative framework, to ensure that high-quality services can be delivered to individuals regardless of where they are based. This is also particularly relevant as food security is more strained in remote communities, and there needs to be appropriate subsidisation to counteract this.

Therefore, there must be more done by Government to support providers – including LnE – to expand and offer their services in a cost-appropriate way for individuals in more challenged communities. Individuals in far regional and rural Australia deserve to have the same level of choice as their metropolitan based counterparts, but the delivery of these services are inherently more expensive, because of the access issue. That is not a cost that should be worn by consumers.

For service providers to fill this gap however, there needs to be renewed discussion between providers and Government about the ways expanded service can be supported whilst ensuring these services remain viable.

We would welcome the opportunity to explore opportunities with Government in this space including:

- Other funding mechanisms that could be put in place to facilitate fresh / nutritious meal delivery to regional and remote communities;
- Establishment of partnerships which would enhance food security; or
- Capacity building programs/campaigns for nutritional literacy in ageing Australians across Australia, but especially in multi-cultural settings and regional, rural and remote communities.

Conclusion

Lite n' Easy remains ready to assist the Government in their development and delivery of the new Aged Care Act and would welcome the opportunity to engage with the Consultation in person.

The fundamentals of the Act strongly align with our priorities around empowering individuals to act with autonomy and exercise choice and control over their own health and wellbeing, and we have a strong contribution to make as these reforms are progressed.

Regards



Nathan Hayman
CEO | Lite n' Easy