

Eating with Friends

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INTRODUCTION

The **Eating with Friends** project aims to address social isolation and poor nutrition amongst older people by developing sustainable and cost effective options for older people to eat with others in their local community. The project is based upon active participation of older people in establishing the design of shared meals, mobilising community resources available to deliver a variety of **Eating with Friends** options with collaboration between Commonwealth, State, and Local Governments as well as non-government agencies.

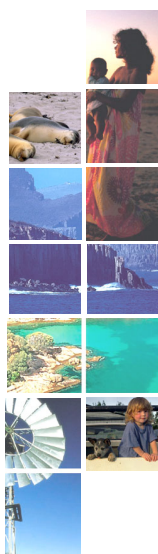
Since the piloting of this concept in Moonah in 2000, **Eating with Friends** has become the community driven initiative of over 13 volunteer groups within Tasmania, with the support of an active steering committee. The **Eating with Friends** concept has built trust and strengthened relationships between different sectors of the community and enhanced networks in and around southern Tasmania. The project is an easily replicable and adaptable model.

BACKGROUND

The percentage of elderly Australians is steadily increasing, and is expected to continue increasing for the next fifty years ¹. The percentage of the Tasmanian population aged over 65 is expected to grow from 13.1% in 1997 to 24.5% in 2026. The population is ageing in Tasmania at a rate higher than the national average.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, not merely the absence of illness or disease” ². To ensure older people obtain and maintain their optimal health and nutritional status, the risk factors for poor nutritional status must be addressed. The following relevant international, national and state policies and plans highlight the importance of maintaining the nutritional health and well-being of older people:

- Eat Well Australia Plan
- Dietary Guidelines for Older Australians.
- Council on the Ageing (Australia).
- Council on the Ageing (Tasmania).
- Strategic Ageing: Australian Issues in Ageing.



- National Strategy for an Ageing Australia.
- Tasmanian Plan for Positive Ageing 2000–2005.
- Department of Education – Partners in Time: Building Active Partnerships between Schools and Older People.
- Tasmanian Food and Nutrition Policy – the project actively implements Recommendation 1 on promoting healthy eating, and recommendations
- National Health Priority Areas – the project will contribute to the prevention and control of injury, which is one priority area in the national strategy.
- Commonwealth Healthy Ageing Policy – the project will increase access for, and offer greater equity to, older people by increasing local support resources and services.

Many older people are at greater risk of nutritional deficits, excesses and imbalances due to physical, social and psychological factors. Some of these factors include: decreasing taste and smell sensitivity, decreased saliva secretion, economic inadequacy, alcohol abuse, dementia, social isolation (living alone), depression or bereavement, memory loss, poor nutrition knowledge, functional impairment, food and medication interactions, nutrient malabsorption and/or teeth and denture problems³.

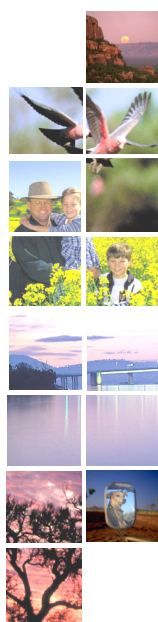
Poor nutritional health in later years affects quality of life, increases dependency, and increases costs of care to the community⁴.

Cobiac and Syrette⁵ are responsible for conducting the most recognised and widely quoted studies in Australia to determine the nutritional status of older people living freely in the community. Using the Australian Nutrition Screening Implementation (ANSI) tool, they concluded that a “disturbingly high percentage” of free-living elderly Australians may be at risk of poor nutritional status and may need urgent reviewing by a health professional. Although these figures were reported to be disturbing, they are not as high as those found recently in north west (NW) Tasmania studies using an identical screening tool.

Two studies^{6,7} conducted in NW Tasmania in 1995 and 1998 (which yielded nearly identical results) show that a much higher percentage of free-living elderly living in this region are at “high” risk of malnutrition than the average population of free-living elderly in Australia (69% versus 30%). The percentage at “moderate” risk of malnutrition was similar (22% versus 21%), and a much lower percentage in NW Tasmania was at no nutritional risk (17% versus 49%).

Eating alone

Eating alone has been shown to impact adversely on older people’s nutritional status leading to a downward spiral of ill-health and increased dependence, increased likelihood of illness, increased risk of falls, increased use of health and community services and decreased quality of life. Of the Tasmanian research described above, it was found that among the 337 Meals on Wheel recipients in the north-west of Tasmania, 77% said they eat alone most of the time.



Meals on Wheels recognises that, although they address some of the issues of poor nutrition among the elderly, social isolation also impacts on appetite and general health. Glenorchy City council found that one of the strongest themes to emerge from its extensive community consultation for the development of a 10 year Community Plan was the need to address social isolation and to build community based initiatives to address the issue.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Aim

Eating with Friends (EWF) aims to address the issues of social isolation and poor nutrition among older people by recruiting communities and volunteer groups.

Objectives include:

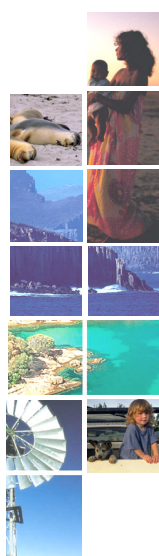
- To increase the number of opportunities for older people to reduce social isolation and develop friendships through regular contact with their peers in a social environment.
- To encourage older people to eat regular and varied nutritious meals.
- To increase the opportunities for community volunteers to develop increased skills, self-confidence, and sense of community.
- To increase the capacity of communities to respond to the needs of isolated elderly people.

Strategies

- Establish and maintain an EWF steering committee to support the development and maintenance of local EWF groups.
- Establish and maintain a “how to” action kit to support community based groups.
- Co-ordinate support services and identify and approach other lead and support agencies.
- Promote the EWF groups and the opportunities for more groups to be developed in other areas of Tasmania.

PROGRESS

Initially these objectives were achieved for only a small population of the Glenorchy Community. An **Eating with Friends** pilot project was proposed for West Moonah, a suburb with a high proportion of older people living alone. Following consultation with over 100 older residents to determine their level of isolation and nutritional risk, several models for shared meals were investigated. It proved that the most popular model to reduce social isolation and increase nutrition for older people involved a



shared meal hosted by the West Moonah Community House and supported by local volunteers.

This model was then replicated throughout the Glenorchy Municipality with the aid of a Steering Committee. Currently, there are a number of agencies involved in running **Eating with Friends** groups, operating throughout and beyond the boundaries of the municipality supporting over 400 people. These range from church groups, volunteer associations, ethnic groups, community houses, welfare agencies, schools and community health centres. Most **Eating with Friends** groups offer a home cooked lunch prepared and served by volunteers, once a month. Participants are charged a small fee and may be assisted to and from the venue for lunch.

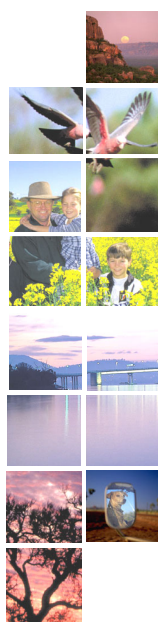
Glenorchy City Council plays a pivotal role in the “**Eating with Friends**” project including auspicing the Steering Committee, co-ordinating promotional activities and providing support to groups. Glenorchy City Council is also the key information and referral point for new groups, participants and volunteers for the project. The Steering Committee has representation from Glenorchy City Council and key stakeholders including the Department of Veterans Affairs, the West Moonah Community House, Community Outreach and Community Nutrition, within the Department of Health and Human Services and Multicultural Tasmania.

The Steering Committee undertakes a number of tasks/activities to ensure continuity of the project. An Action Kit was developed to assist organisations in the establishment and running of **Eating with Friends** groups. The Committee hosted a community forum to provide an opportunity to share the experiences and results from the West Moonah pilot and to explore within workshops the potential of other organisations hosting **Eating with Friends** groups. A Volunteer training session was arranged through Volunteering Tasmania for people interested in volunteering for **Eating with Friends** groups and a newsletter is circulated widely to community groups and provides updates on new “**Eating with Friends**” groups and other relevant information.

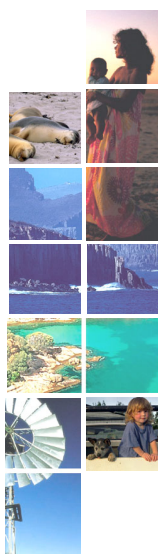
Regular forums are also held for **Eating with Friends** Group Co-ordinators and Volunteers to come together to share success stories and brainstorm through any difficulties they have.

OUTCOMES OR RESULTS

- The project has provided opportunities for both older people to reduce their social isolation and for residents to volunteer and regain the “good neighbour” spirit in their community. As at October, 2002 there are 13 volunteer EWF groups in Tasmania with another three to soon commence. There have been no “drop out” groups and all are active on a regular basis with the exception of one group which is struggling to continue.
- On average the groups organise a shared meal every month. Numbers of participants range from 12 to 110, with a total number of over 400 regularly benefiting from this program. There are approximately 85 volunteers spending approximately 10 hours each for each event.



- The groups are all based in southern Tasmania, spanning over 5 Local Government municipalities. There is interest in supporting volunteer groups in other parts of the state.
- Each group raises its own funds to continue to provide shared meals. This is done through charging a small fee to participants, fundraising and seeking private sector donations and sponsorships.
- Volunteers involved in the project have contributed to a greater sense of community, as well as developing their own skills and self-confidence. In turn, the volunteers are vital to the sustainability of established local EWF groups.
- The sustainability and expansion of the **Eating with Friends** project is due to the ongoing efforts of the project's Steering Committee. This Committee provides an additional co-ordination and support role to current groups and any new groups. Steering Committee members have proven to be very committed to the project, acting as strong advocates and mobilising resources for the project. The management of the project does not rest with any one agency, this being a critical factor in the prosperity of the project.



CONCLUSIONS

Eating with Friends has been well received in the local community as demonstrated by the level of public interest and support by local volunteers and businesses. It has become sustainable through intersectoral co-operation, active and dedicated volunteers, and commitment by local, state and commonwealth government.

Participants have praised the work of the groups and volunteers. Anecdotal comments are that monthly **Eating with Friends** lunches have given them something to “talk about” with their families and visitors.

As an innovative demonstration project, it has a lot of useful information and resources to impart to others addressing the issue of eating alone and social isolation. The **Eating with Friends** project represents a low cost and sustainable model for meeting the needs of socially isolated older people at risk of poor nutrition. This model was unprecedented in that it did not rely on government funded community care services to deliver yet another community service. Instead, it has mobilised local resources, including local neighbourhood houses, local residents, volunteers, church groups, ethnic communities and schools to explore their own capacity to address the issues within their own community.

Additionally, local health and welfare agencies and community health centres have relished the opportunity to replicate this model for the benefit of their own clientele in addition to their usual services, in an environment of funding pressures and limitations.



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PRESENTER

Jackie Dermody has over 15 years of experience in working with Meals on Wheels, both as a volunteer and as an employee (State Executive Officer and National Secretary MOW). Now retired, Jackie keeps busy with the Eating with Friends group, West Moonah and as part of the Eating with Friends Steering Committee. In addition to this, she is the State Secretary of the Safety House Association of Tasmania.

