

'Eating With Friends': Is it addressing social eating needs of older Tasmanians?



Participant Perspectives

Report to the 'Eating With Friends' Steering Committee, January 2013

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Context.....	3
Executive Summary	4
Methodology	6
Sample	6
Ethics.....	6
Analysis	7
Findings and Discussion.....	7
Conclusion.....	14
References.....	15
Appendices.....	16
Appendix 1: Letter of Introduction	16
Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet.....	17
Appendix 3: Consent Form	20
Appendix 4: Participant Demographic Questionnaire.....	22
Appendix 5: Topics for Cluster Discussion and One-on-One Interviews	24

Acknowledgements

The EWF research team and Steering Committee would like to thank the four EWF groups and their coordinators who very kindly gave their time and shared their stories. Special thanks to two members of the steering group (Karen Austen and Rebecca Essex) for facilitating the researcher's introductions to the groups. Sarah Brinckman has done an excellent job editing this report.

Context

Eating with Friends (EWF) is a service model funded primarily through the Home and Community Care Program (HACC) bringing together older people for a nutritious meal. It aims to strengthen community, reduce social isolation and enhance mental wellbeing amongst participants. The program has been operating as a service model in Tasmania since 2000, when a 'Meals on Wheels' group of volunteers in Moonah, a Hobart suburb, developed the program as a way of addressing social isolation observed amongst their clients.

The core values of EWF are:

- to provide low cost, varied and nutritional meals;
- to encourage a culture of inclusiveness where everyone is welcome;
- 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 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 older people;
- to focus on local community resources; and
- to ensure appropriate access is provided.

Now, with over 30 groups operating throughout the State in both urban and rural communities, an evidence-based analysis of the effectiveness of the program through the eyes of its participants was seen as a prudent step to shape EWF into the future as well as the policy environment within which it operates to better suit the needs of older Tasmanians.

This project was conducted as part of the University of Tasmania's University Department of Rural Health (UDRH) 2012 primary health care practitioner research scholarship program. For the past few years, the UDRH has provided multiple scholarships which enable Tasmanian primary health care practitioners to undertake a paid, short-term research project under the mentorship of experienced researchers.

The project was overseen by a Steering Committee comprising Ms Kim Boyer (Chair), Dr. Peter Orpin, Alexandra King (PhD student undertaking related research), Karen Austen (EWF Coordinator) and Rebecca Essex (EWF Management Committee).

Executive Summary

The focus of the research project was to explore Eating with Friends (EWF) through the perspectives of its participants. The scope and timing of the project precluded involving all of the 30-odd groups statewide; instead participants from four selected and diverse EWF groups were involved through discussion groups and/or individual interviews. The four groups represented both rural and urban contexts and both newly established and well established groups. Each group met in a different type of venue – community health centre, local school, aged care facility and community club.

The key findings were:

- the social aspects and friendships formed in the groups were highlighted as the primary benefit of participating in these groups.
- participants in EWF welcomed the nutritious and affordable food provided but considered this as less important than the social aspects of the group.
- venues where EWF groups met and ate were a critical element to the dynamics of the group and may impact on the nature of attendees.
- lack of transport and illness were the main barriers reported as preventing members from attending their EWF group on a regular basis.
- the leadership of a coordinator/spokesperson and a number of core volunteers was noted as essential to the smooth operation of the groups.
- a significant number of participants reported that they had access to few alternative social eating opportunities, either because of a lack of services/opportunities in their area and/or lack of transport to alternative opportunities. Alternative provided meal services cited by participants were primarily at local day centres or through Meals-on-Wheels.

- The age range of people attending EWF groups was diverse, with some participants under 65 years while others were over 85 years of age indicating that the model of EWF appeals to multiple age groups within the older population.
- The ratio of females to males across the groups surveyed was more than 2:1.
- there was significant variation between the groups around attendees who lived alone, and those who did not. The number of couples attending groups was also reported as being on the increase in some groups.



Methodology

Sample

A sample of four EWF groups was identified through consultation between the state coordinator of EWF and the researcher as a representative sample of the diversity of EWF groups, incorporating examples of:

- rural and urban communities;
- new and well established groups;
- northern and southern communities;
- groups who met on different days of the week; and
- a variety of EWF models of social eating, in four different types of venue – a community club, a local rural school, an aged care facility and a community health centre.

The members from each group who took part in the study were self-selected in that they were invited to volunteer to take part in one or more of the data collection methods. The focus groups occurred during the regular lunch gathering of each group, with follow-up one-on-one interviews conducted either on that day, or in person or by phone at an agreed later date.

The study comprised:

- self-selected focus groups within each of the four selected EWF groups;
- self-selected individual participants from the groups;
- researcher notes of the interaction within the groups; and
- interviews with two volunteer coordinators ('key informants').

Ethics

The project was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania).

Data collection

In line with the project's ethical approvals, the three ways EWF attendees could choose to participate were:

1. by completing a short demographic questionnaire (copy attached);
2. by being part of a discussion/cluster group interview (copy of questions which guided discussion attached); or
3. by participating in a one-on-one interview conducted by the researcher in person or via telephone (copy of questions which guided discussion attached).

When the researcher visited the groups, she kept a journal of her thoughts about each group; these thoughts are also incorporated into the discussion below.

Two key informants were identified during visits to the EWF groups and approached with the aim of adding further insight into the stories from the discussion groups and interviews.

The group and individual interviews were digitally recorded with verbal consent of all concerned and were transcribed for analysis.

There was some reluctance among some members of the well-established groups to participate in the focus groups or in an interview; the reason most often cited for this was 'interview fatigue'.

Analysis

The data were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and were then thematically analysed. No names were recorded meaning transcripts were de-identified at this point. Preliminary themes were discussed with the Steering Committee.



Findings and Discussion

Quantitative data

This study was a 'snapshot' of the attendees of four groups on one of their meeting/lunch days in the latter part of 2012. The proportion of participation in the study (whether by questionnaire, focus group or interview) among attendees on that day varied significantly between the groups (see Figure 1 below)

Figure 1: Participation in study

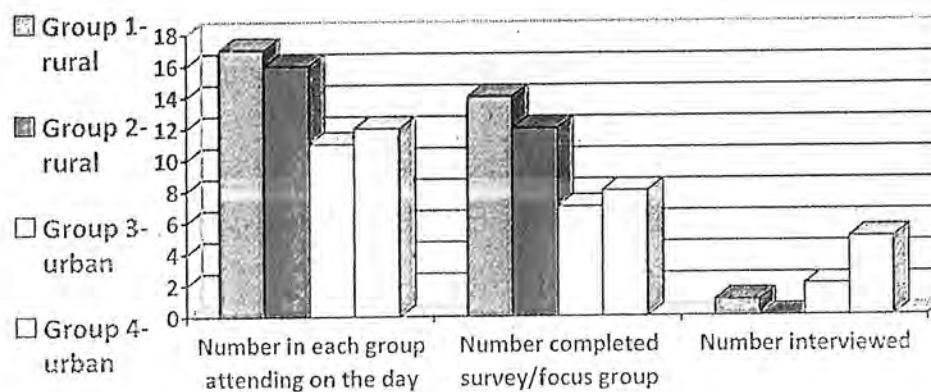


Figure 2: Gender of attendees

The number of females attending the groups was significantly higher across all age groups

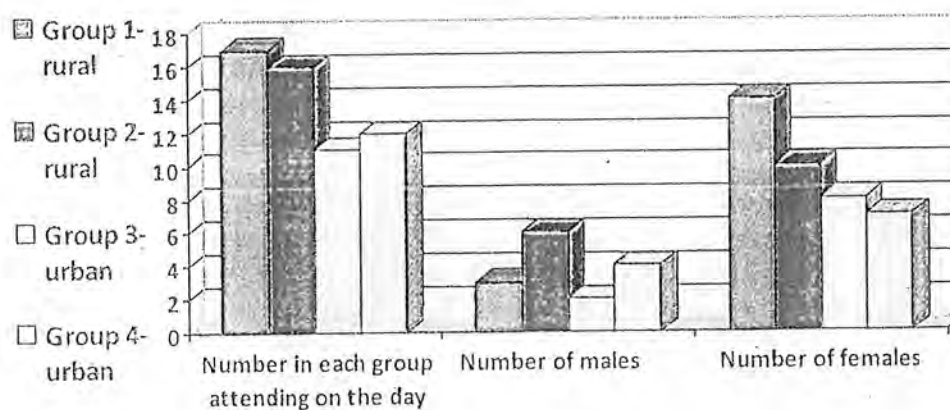
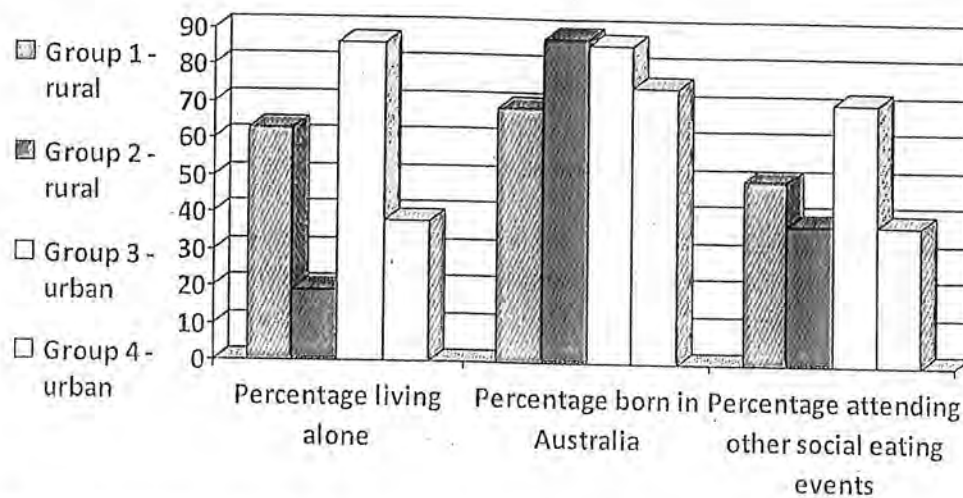


Figure 3: Some participant characteristics



From the survey instrument some of the key characteristics between and among the groups were identified:

- across all groups there was only a small number of participants born outside Australia;
- there was significant variation between the groups of those participants who lived alone; and
- alternative social eating opportunities also varied, to a lesser extent, between the participant groups.

Qualitative data

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data yielded a number of key themes and sub-themes. These key themes relate to: locality; socialisation; connections; food; sustainability; alternatives; enablers and preventers; and issues related to change. The following comments were made by group members in relation to these key themes and sub themes.

- **Locality.** When asked why they attended a particular group participants generally identified issues of access and convenience with comments such as *"it's not too far from here"*, *"I'm local"*, *"it's close by and easy to get to"* and *"we live next door"*. So the closeness and ease to get to the group's location were important factors.
 - (i) Setting/venue was a sub theme with comments such as: *"I love this set up"*, *"it's the atmosphere"*, *"I also like coming and supporting (rural) school"*. *"I like how its set up...smaller tables helps to interact"* and

"good meeting place", which added to the positive aspects of the group location. Participants had developed the atmosphere and sense of place which worked for them.

- **Socialisation.** Social aspects of the experience were consistently identified by participants as the reason that they started going and kept going to their groups. This could be further divided into sub-themes:
 - (i) Companionship with comments such as *"it breaks the monotony of being at home all the time by yourself"*, *"I like the company"* and *"I live alone"*.
 - (ii) Friendship with comments such as *"got to know the people that go pretty well and regard them all as friends"*, people go to *"make new friends"*, *"I came for the friendship"* and *"meeting friends, and I don't care if I've met them or not, they're still friends aint they?"*
 - (iii) Social Interaction with peers was considered important with comments such as *"people speak to me"*, *"you meet people and talk to people that you've never met before, so that's why I go"* and *"now it has grown a bit with married couples coming, they come for the company"*.
 - (iv) Belonging and acceptance with comments such as *"nobody's left out"*, *"if there's a stranger here, which there isn't, for us you don't treat them any different than you do the others"* and *"a small place like (urban place), everyone mixes, everyone is welcome"*. This is further highlighted by the welcome and integration into the larger group that people with disabilities get from the groups which they visit. One person stated, *"we go to support our clients...it's an outing for him... they accept people and they are very friendly"*.
- **Connections.** Being and keeping people connected to a group, and to the wider cultural and historical community, is an overarching theme of all the groups. Two sub-themes were identified:
 - (i) Cultural connectedness was a key aspect of one group, where the strength of a shared cultural background was a core element in the initial development of the group, and where that cultural richness was shared with other participants in the group.
 - (ii) Community identity was important and strengthened through belonging to the groups with such comments as: *"I also like coming and supporting (the local) school"*, *"keep up with the locals on both sides of*

the river”, having “local connections”, “ good mixing with the children and seeing what is happening in the school. Being part of the school”; and “a community in a community”.

- **Food.** Food remains an important part of group participation for many, with comments such as *“food gorgeous”, “having a lovely meal”, “it’s a change of food to you, when you cook your own”, “the food is spot on”, “the food is always different”, “you get a good meal, always have a good meal” and “I cook my own meals, so it’s a nice change to have a meal out”.* Thus, eating good food, especially when you don’t have to cook it yourself, was an integral part of these social occasions. One group member noted that *“occasionally you get something that’s not quite to your liking, some particular food”.*
- **Group Adaptability/Sustainability;** Participants identified a number of key factors which enabled their group to adapt and remain potentially sustainable. These included:
 - (i) Moving from one eating model and venue to another, due to changed circumstances both external and within the group.
 - (ii) Capacity to keep volunteers and/or attract new ones. Dwindling volunteer numbers remain an issue.
 - (iii) Overcoming transport and access challenges (see enablers below).
- **Alternative social eating opportunities.** While a number of participants identified alternative social eating opportunities (Figure 3 above) the issue of lack of alternative opportunities for local social eating was mentioned by a number of participants, with such comments as *“not a lot else in the area to make friends...social things” (urban group), “too young to come to the day centres” (rural group), “my idea was why do I want to go there, I’m not old enough , that’s what I think about the elderly citz, I’m not keen!”(rural group), “not a lot of ways to make friends elsewhere in the area” (urban group), “there’s none around” (rural group).*
- **Enablers and barriers.** The main enabler for people to attend their groups was access to transport. Comments included: *“the main thing is transport”, “I’ve got my own car”, “everyone else gets picked up” by the bus, “some couldn’t get here any other way...we need the bus”,* and one participant said *“I use taxis which I find is more convenient door to door, but I’m lucky that I can afford to do it, because I’ve got taxi vouchers, which is just as well”.* Conversely, lack of transport becomes a major barrier.

Accessing transport to attend social eating opportunities such as EWF, both in rural and urban areas, was a major issue for participants. Some have had to become reliant on transport provided by others, with many older people either choosing to, or losing their ability to drive, and having to rely on taxis or others to take them. Community transport was identified as a major enabler when available. Where public transport was available, issues with personal mobility often prevented people using it. Coombes (2008,p.17) found that *"transport difficulties represent a major risk for EWF group"*, and this has been substantiated by many comments of participants.

The other main issue identified as preventing people from attending their groups was disability/illness, with such comments as: *"only if I had trouble with my hips and I couldn't walk"*; *"only health, if I wasn't well"*; and *"yes illness has kept me from coming, otherwise I will always come"*. Some people said, *"pretty rare that I'd miss"*; *"no, nothing would stop me"* and *"I wouldn't miss it"*. Two other barriers mentioned were *"laziness"* and *"caring responsibilities"*. A sub-theme could be 'ageing', when it comes to group coordinators and volunteers as indicated by the comment *"now I'm older it's easier to go to the group at the school and enjoy it more and no responsibility...getting older prevents people from being more involved"*.

- e Change issues; The group participants were asked what they would want to change about their group, be that the day, the time, the venue. The consensus from all groups was summed up by one participant who stated *"God, no!"* Other comments included: *"no it suits us...he really enjoys it"*, *"wouldn't change anything, not even our name"*, *"everything seems to work here alright"*, *"I don't think so...I think it's quite good"*, *"oh no, it's an outing"* and *"no, I would tell them or stop going...they have to be good, or I would have stopped going, best recommendation I can give them (laugh)"*. Participants were therefore generally happy to see their group continue unchanged, with some suggestions for additional activities such as *"a game of cards, so we play in the league, but that might be something we can start"* and *"I'd like to meet people outside the group"*.

Participants were asked what they would do if their group ceased meeting. Comments included: *"I would find another group, yes I enjoy it"* to *"no, there's none around"*, to *"oh that's a hard question...oh...no..I don't know about that one"*. Most people were proud of, and loyal to, their particular EWF group.



- **Variations between groups.** While the four groups met monthly, the days on which they met and the venues in which they met, varied.

Members from the school-based group frequently noted the advantages and benefits of this model to the children who were involved. They felt it helped teach the students hospitality skills and skills in dealing/communicating with older people in their community. For example, *"I think that it's given the students there an educational experience and in firstly working with the elderly and working with hospitality"*.

Some of the monthly luncheons were held on week days, some on weekends. Some groups only met during certain times of the year (i.e. school terms), whilst others were held on public holidays. Group members appeared to 'fit in' with these arrangements, or to have assisted in shaping them.

While the cost of meals was similar across the four groups, the researcher noted a variation in the type and nature of the lunches served. For example, some components of the main meal were brought in from an outside source for one group, but vegetables and dessert were made by catering within the group. One group had their meal cooked totally by volunteers and wine was served for those who would like it. One group had its meal cooked by catering students, which included a starter and after dinner sweets and café-style coffee. Some meals just included a main meal and a sweet. The amount of food served also differed,

some servings were quite small, and others could have fed nearly two people. Some groups offered 'seconds' to those that wanted it. Another sold any remaining food to people that came to the luncheon.

- **Younger participants with disabilities.** It was noted that a small number of younger people with disabilities attended one of the EWF groups in this study. The study did not have the capacity to explore their specific experiences of EWF, but the research team believes this could be an appropriate further study in its own right, as it indicates the potential flexibility of the EWF model to enhance social inclusion.

Conclusion

The project sought to answer the questions: *Is Eating with Friends addressing the social eating needs of older Tasmanians?* Our findings, coming from both the perspectives of the participants and the observations of the researcher, would give a qualified 'yes' to this, at least for members of the groups in the study sample. The study found that the EWF model has within its quite simple premise of providing opportunities for older people to gather together to share both a meal and social intercourse, sufficient flexibility to allow groups to evolve in ways that fit the particular needs and aspirations of their members. The four studied groups are as notable for their individuality as for what they share. They take the shape of their members and therefore suit those members. The question that cannot be answered from within these data is to what extent there are those older people for whom existing groups have not, or do not, meet their particular needs and/or who feel excluded or unable to take the necessary steps to find a group within their locality that suits them. Such people are unlikely to find their way into these groups or, if they do, to remain within the group. It can only be left for individual groups to be vigilant and responsive to the needs of those within their catchment.

The two major threats to the ongoing viability of these groups remain:

- access by participants and potential participants to transport especially in the face of decreasing mobility; and
- reliance on a small number of committed volunteers or coordinators who are often themselves ageing.

References

Coombes, J. 2008, *Eating with Friends project: Evaluation*.

Herne, K. 2009, *Social eating programs for older people. Literature search*. University of Tasmania



Appendices

Appendix 1: Letter of Introduction

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Web www.utas.edu.au/ruralhealth



UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF RURAL HEALTH



**Lin Bowers-Ingram,
Research Assistant**

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Dear member of the [insert name of 'Eating with Friends' group],

My name is Lin Bowers-Ingram. I am a Research Assistant with the University Department of Rural Health at the University of Tasmania.

I am inviting you to participate in a narrative study where we would like to understand what Eating with Friends means to you, what you like most about it, and if it can be improved.

On the following pages there is some information about this study.

Thank you for reading this letter and considering whether you would like to participate in this study.

I am very much looking forward to sharing a lunch with you in the near future.

If you have any questions at all please call me. As I work for the University on Wednesdays, please me on 6226-6629. Or you can phone and leave a message for me with Sarah on 6226-7375 leaving a time and day which would be convenient for me to phone you back.

Yours sincerely

Lin

**Appendix 2: Participant
Information Sheet**

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UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF RURAL HEALTH

Participant Information Sheet

'Eating With Friends:

Is it addressing social eating needs of older Tasmanians?

Chief Investigator: Ms Kim Boyer

Researcher: Ms Lin Bowers-Ingram

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I would like to invite you to take part in a study we are conducting to explore individual and shared group experiences of people that attend a small number of 'Eating with Friends' social eating groups in Tasmania.

We will be collecting viewpoints and stories of the highs and lows of being a member of Eating with Friends. This will enable us to gain a greater understanding of why people attend, what makes it possible for them to attend, barriers which may prevent them from attending and whether these groups are meeting the expectations and needs of older Tasmanian's living in their local communities.

Should you decide you wish to participate, we will be asking you to complete a short questionnaire (to gain some background information). We will also be asking for a small discussion cluster of people (8-10) who regularly attend the group to participate in an informal discussion group about their experiences. These discussions will last around 30 minutes and will be conducted during your meal time at your regular Eating with Friends group location. For those who would like to provide further information and a greater understanding for the research team, we invite any member of Eating with Friends group, as well as the discussion cluster members, to participate in a short one-on-one interview (30 minutes), either in person or via telephone.



If, after reading this information sheet, you are prepared to be part of this study could you please advise our researcher, Lin Bowers-Ingram when she attends your group lunch with Karen Austen (Eating with Friends state co-ordinator).

The discussion and interviews will, with your permission, be taped for later transcription and analysis. The data will be used to prepare an article for publication in a professional journal, as well as a report to the Eating with Friends Steering Committee. You will also receive a copy of this report through your Eating with Friends co-ordinator. We will ensure you cannot be individually identified in this article.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you can decline to answer any question, and you can withdraw your involvement, or your information, at any point up until we incorporate it into study findings. This information sheet and consent form, which you will be asked to sign if you decide to be involved in this study, are designed to protect your rights.

Following reporting we will hold the data in secure and confidential electronic and hardcopy storage at the University until we destroy it in five years' time.

This study has been approved by the Social Science Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network. If you have any concerns or questions about the study in general, please contact the Chief Investigator, Kim Boyer on 0418 124 110 or by email at Kim.Boyer@utas.edu.au . Any concerns or complaints of an ethical nature should be addressed to the Executive Officer of the Ethics Network on (03) 6226 7479 or email human.ethics@utas.edu.au quoting ethics reference number H???????

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We will be sending each group that participates in this study a summary copy of the final report for your information and we look forward to working with you and hearing your personal stories.

Kind regards

Kim Boyer
Chief Investigator

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CONSENT FORM

‘Eating With Friends: Is it addressing social eating needs of older Tasmanians?’

Chief Investigator: Ms Kim Boyer

Researcher: Ms Lin Bowers-Ingram

-
1. I have read and understood the ‘Information Sheet’ for this study.
 2. The nature and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.
 3. I understand that the study involves completing a short survey and, possibly, participation in a discussion group and one-on-one interview.
 4. I have advised that there are no significant risks associated with participation in this study.
 5. I understand that all research data will be securely stored on the University of Tasmania premises for five years, and then will be destroyed.
 6. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
 7. I agree that research data gathered from me for the study may be published provided that I cannot be identified as a participant.
 8. I understand that my identity will be kept confidential and that any information I supply to the researcher(s) will be used only for the purposes of the research.
 9. I agree to participate in this investigation and understand that I may withdraw at any time without any effect, and if I so wish, may request at any time up until its incorporation into the final report, that any identifiable data I have supplied to date be withdrawn from the research.

- I am willing to participate by:
- a) First, completing a short questionnaire
 - b) Then, contributing to a discussion cluster AND/OR
 - c) Engaging in a short one-on-one interview

Name of Participant:

Signature:

Date:

Statement by Investigator

I have explained this project and the implications of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation.

If the Investigator has not had an opportunity to talk to participants prior to them participating, the following must be ticked.

The participant has received the Information Sheet in which my details have been provided so that participants have the opportunity to contact me prior to them consenting to participate in this project.

Name of Investigator Ms Lin Bowers-Ingram

Signature of Investigator _____

PLEASE TICK ALL RELEVANT BOXES

If 'yes' please state which

Meals on Wheels

Meals at Day Centres

Other

Please
specify _____

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. All the information will be kept in the strictest confidence.

*Appendix 5: Topics for
Cluster Discussion and
One-on-One Interviews*

'EATING WITH FRIENDS' STUDY

'Eating With Friends: Is it addressing social eating needs for older Tasmanians'

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSIONS AND INTERVIEWS

A1 Why do you go to 'Eating With Friends'?

A2 Why do you go to this particular 'Eating with Friends'?

- They help with transport
- The cost of the meal
- The quality of the meal
- The variety of meals
- You knowing other people who go
- Chance of making new friends
- It is close to where you live
- The day of the week it is held
- They have activities/entertainment
- Other. Please specify

B What would prevent you from attending this group?

- Higher cost of meals
- Change in types of meals
- Loss of transport
- Increasing carer responsibilities
- Loss of friend/s
- Being unwell

C What are the things you like best about your group?

D What are the things you don't like about your group (or what would you change)?

E Would you recommend this group to your friends or neighbours?

- Yes. Why? OR No. Why?

F What would you do if your regular group stopped running?

- Attend a different group
- Find a different social group
- Find a different eating group
- Other. Please specify

