HOW DOES MATHERS HOUSE FACILITATE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS?

Mathers Place
MATHERS HOUSE
CRITERION HOUSE

A PROGRAM OF

City *of* HOBART

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The loss of a partner, restricted finances, issues with health and mobility, as well as changes to an older person's transport options, can greatly impact an older person's opportunities to bond with others and maintain social connections. Studies into the effects of the absence of social connections verify that social isolation and loneliness places an older person at an increased risk of physical and mental health issues such as weight gain, heart disease, stroke, heightened blood pressure, dementia, depression and suicide.

Alternatively, being socially connected to others improves a person's overall health, increases the likelihood of recovery after serious illness, and can slow down cognitive decline and the onset of dementia. Being socially connected is part of a lifestyle of positive ageing.

Mathers House is an initiative of the City of Hobart's Positive Ageing strategy which aims to foster a community that is inclusive and accessible for a diversity of older people, and which provides opportunities for older people to participate and lead a fulfilling life. A selection of activities and programs based within group settings, volunteering opportunities, and a cafe are available at Mathers House.

The qualitative data was collected over a period of a month at Mathers House and was open to any person who participated at Mathers House aged 50 years and older. Sixty-six people aged 54 to 92 years shared their experiences in an individual interview, a focus group, a telephone interview or a questionnaire.

KEY FINDINGS

It was identified that Mathers House facilitates social connections in a variety of different ways which is heightened when those factors intersect.

Social connections are facilitated by offering the community a welcoming space that is pleasant and friendly to participate in as well as being physically accessible, centrally located, affordable and warm.

The cafe is significant as it allows participants to not only develop relationships within their group activity but offers a relaxed and affordable space where people can extend social interactions prior to or after a program.

Mathers House attracts people who typically have an interest in meeting others and participating in group settings. Apart from computer tutoring, all the activities that take place at Mathers House occur in group settings, with participants often describing how they came for the class but stayed for the friendships they have made inside the class.

The friendliness and the warmth of the staff and volunteers were also described by some of the participants as aspects about Mathers House that made them want to return.

Mathers House facilitates new connections and helps maintain old connections; however, it may not be as successful in reaching out to or satisfying the needs of those most at risk of isolation and loneliness. This raises the question – what could Mathers House do better to facilitate social connections for those who are most isolated, especially for those within the community at a severe point of isolation and loneliness where community resources such as Mathers House become beyond accessibility?

This also raises the question of whose responsibility is it to support those most at risk of social isolation and loneliness. While it was identified that Mathers House plays an important role in facilitating social connections for older people, the issue of social isolation and loneliness amongst the older community is large and requires a multi-faceted approach to tackle it. This may be beyond the scope of Mathers House but may involve the City of Hobart working alongside community services and in collaboration with those who are surviving social isolation and loneliness, to develop strategies and policies.

CITY OF HOBART, POSITIVE AGEING AND MATHERS HOUSE

WHAT IS POSITIVE AGEING?

The Australian Psychological Society defines positive ageing as 'the process of maintaining a positive attitude, feeling good about yourself, keeping fit and healthy, and engaging fully in life as you age' [1].

Positive Ageing refers to a culture of recognising and celebrating the inclusion of older people in the community, reducing the barriers that limit their ability to participate, and valuing their contributions, skills and knowledge [2].

City of Hobart's Positive Ageing strategy acknowledges the importance of self-determination and self-empowerment for older people. Mathers House is funded and operated by the City of Hobart as part of its Community Development division.

WHAT IS MATHERS HOUSE?

Mathers House is part of the City of Hobart's focus on Positive Ageing strategy. The strategy aims to foster a community that is inclusive and accessible and which provides a diversity of people with opportunities to lead a fulfilling life.

Mathers House employs one full time staff member and three part-time staff members and also relies heavily on a large team of volunteers. There are 65 volunteers at Mathers House with approximately ten people volunteering on any given day. Volunteer roles include cooking, teaching a musical instrument, computer tutoring and meeting and greeting participants.

Mathers House is open Monday to Friday and the space is available to hire for community events after business hours and on weekends.

WHAT DOES MATHERS HOUSE OFFER?

Mathers House offers a range of programs aimed at promoting social, emotional and physical wellbeing. Weekly programs include:

- Physical exercise classes such as seated Pilates, Tai Chi and Zumba Gold,

- Activities that promote creativity, intellectual stimulation and social networking such as mah'jong, playing the ukulele, scrabble, book club and art and craft groups.

Mathers House hosts informative and educational events and occasional musical concerts, as well as external group tours such as historical walks and picnics at kunyanyi/ Mt Wellington.

Long- table luncheons are held each season.

WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE CITY OF HOBART'S POSITIVE AGEING PROGRAMS AT MATHERS HOUSE?

Mathers House welcomes a diversity of people but is dedicated to providing facilities and programs designed for Hobart's older community. It estimated that there are 500 visits to Mathers House each week from at least 18 different postcode areas within and surrounding Hobart city.

'In comparison to other well known risk factors the absence of supportive social relationships is equivalent to the health effects of smoking 15 cigarettes a day or drinking six alcoholic drinks daily.

Social isolation is more harmful than not exercising and twice as harmful as obesity'[3]

AIM OF THE PROJECT

The aim of this project was to explore how Mathers House facilitated social connections for older people. This involved identifying how older people's sense of social connection had changed since coming to Mathers House.

Participants' stories and experiences were used to understand how important Mathers House is in reducing social isolation for older people and highlighting the need for the City of Hobart to continue supporting the positive ageing programs at Mathers House.

Recommendations on how Mathers House could improve its services, particularly in relation to facilitating social connections, will inform future programs and intitiatives at Mathers House.

CONNECTION, ISOLATION & LONELINESS

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE SOCIALLY CONNECTED?

Social connections refer to the network of people surrounding a person. It means being in contact with people whether they are friends, family or other people in the community such as neighbours or support workers. Being socially connected implies there is opportunity to interact and engage with others regardless of whether or not you seek to be socially connected to others.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL CONNECTIONS FOR OLDER PEOPLE'S HEALTH?

Being socially connected, participating in society and having social support has been recognised as beneficial for physical and mental health [4,5]. Many studies have observed the differences between older people who were socially connected and those who lacked social connections and found that those who were part of a network of people typically had better health [5].

Being socially connected can decrease the likelihood of depression occurring as well as delaying cognitive decline such as dementia [6]. Research found that socially connected women who survived breast cancer were less impacted and more resilient in their recovery than those who were less socially connected [7].

While there are many positive outcomes of creating and maintaining social connections it is the potential impact of being without social connections that is most detrimental to people's health.

WHAT IS SOCIAL ISOLATION?

Social isolation refers to the lack of social connections, company or community. People can choose to be socially isolated or it forced upon them due to their circumstances. It may also describe a person's geographical remoteness, exclusion from dominant cultural or language groups, or difficulty in accessing services.

WHAT IS LONELINESS?

Loneliness describes the emotional experience brought on by the absence of meaningful social connections and interactions with others. Loneliness is often characterised by sadness and can still be experienced by someone who has many social connections [6]. The Council on the Ageing states 'the impact of loneliness depends not on the quantity of social interactions but the extent to which these satisfy a person's subjective need for social connection" [6].

WHO AND HOW MANY PEOPLE EXPERIENCE SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS?

It is not known for sure how many older people experience social isolation and loneliness effects. Figures drawn from Australian and international studies suggest that anywhere between 7 to 43 % of older people live with it [8,9]. Rates of social isolation and loneliness are found to be higher amongst older populations than any other age group [9].

As the older population is mostly female it is women who make up the largest proportion of individuals who experience social isolation and loneliness. However, it is men who are most at risk of becoming socially isolated and experiencing loneliness [5].

As the world population increases, as well as the rates of people living alone, it is estimated that the rates of people experiencing social isolation and loneliness will also increase [4].

HOW DOES SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS IMPACT UPON PHYSICAL HEALTH?

Social isolation and loneliness are emerging as key predictors of poor health and lifestyle choices in older people [8,9,10, 17]. Studies suggest that the mortality rates associated with prolonged loneliness are on par with the mortality rates associated with smoking, alcohol consumption and diseases [11].

Studies have also found that loneliness and social isolation can impact a person's ability to sleep, decrease energy levels, create body pain and headaches, contribute to a loss of appetite, encourage an increase or loss in weight, and can exacerbate pre-existing medical conditions [12].

Rates of rehospitalisation and falls are higher amongst those who are socially isolated while the likelihood of heart disease and stroke become greater amongst those experiencing loneliness [10,11]. Blood pressure is noted as being higher among older people who are socially isolated than those who are socially connected [13].

A lack of social connections has been linked to self-destructive lifestyle choices such as smoking, excessive consumption of alcohol and unhealthy eating [10, 11, 13]. A study has found that people who are socially connected are less likely to visit health professionals such as dentists [5].

HOW DOES SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS IMPACT UPON MENTAL HEALTH?

The emotional and mental consequences of social isolation include an increased likelihood of the onset or worsening of dementia, as well as a general decline in cognitive abilities [4,6,10,11].

Mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety are linked to social isolation and loneliness [4, 10,11] as well as negative feelings such as: feeling worthless, frustrated, purposelessness, hopeless, angry and suicidal [10,11,12]. Men in particular have a particularly heightened risk of attempting suicide [10].

WHAT ARE RISK FACTORS OF SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS?

There is a range of factors that increase the risk of social isolation and loneliness ranging from individual circumstances to broader social barriers. Living with health issues such as an illness, limited mobility, impaired vision and hearing, and mental illness can be a barrier to connecting with others [14].

Limited transport options due to living remotely or a loss of drivers licence can further reduce people's ability to leave home and meet with others. The cost of private transport for those lacking the mobility to take public transport can be beyond an older person's limited finances. Poverty and the absence of affordable activities have been identified as putting people at further risk of isolation [15]. Changes to a person's social environment such as being widowed, loss of family members and close friends can drastically influence an older person's opportunities to interact with others. Older carers are more likely to be isolated, especially after losing the person they were caring for [16]. While some sources describe living alone as a risk factor for social isolation and loneliness [14] other studies suggest there is little relationship between those who live alone and those who are at risk of isolation [16].

Marginalised groups such as those in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, Aboriginal people, those living with physical and learning disabilities, homelessness and living in remote areas are reported to be more likely to face the risk of social isolation and loneliness [16].

Some studies suggest that older people who are lesbian, gay or transgender are at greater risk of encountering social isolation and loneliness as they age because they are less likely to have children and more likely to be estranged from family than heterosexual and cis-gendered people [16].

By being male, a person has an increased likelihood of experiencing social isolation and loneliness [16].

WHAT ARE THE PROTECTIVE FACTORS AGAINST SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS?

Socially participative and physically active lifestyles [17] are found to be central to the wellbeing of older people. Having social supports in place play a significant role in preventing illness brought on by social isolation and loneliness [5]. Connections founded upon friendships have been observed in studies as being the most effective type of relationships in increasing a person's sense of being socially connected than those based on relation and children [14].

Other protective factors include being involved with community groups such as faith-based or cultural groups [21]. Caring for a pet has been suggested as playing a role in limiting social isolation and loneliness, however, this research is limited and contested [14].

THE TASMANIAN AND HOBART CONTEXT

Tasmania's population is the fastest ageing in Australia with over twenty per cent of the state made up of people aged 60 years and older [19]. Hobart's current population of people aged 65 years and over currently accounts for 18.9% of the population. However, it is expected to increase and make up almost a quarter of the population by the year 2056 [3]. Due to Tasmania and Hobart's quickly ageing population, the rates of people experiencing social isolation and loneliness is predicted to rise [9].

The state of Tasmania already suffers from the poorest rates of health than any other state of Australia, including higher rates of death, mental health, risk-taking behaviour such as smoking and poor diet, and disease [19]. Additionally, 55 % of people aged 65 years and older live with a disability, making Tasmania the state with the highest rate of older people living with a disability [3].

INITIATIVES FOR FACILITATING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

WHAT DO OTHER INITIATIVES AIMED AT FACILITATING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS FOR OLDER PEOPLE LOOK LIKE?

BEFRIENDING AND MENTORING:

For those who cannot or who have difficulty leaving their home 'befriending' or 'mentoring' is reported to have been effective in reducing social isolation and sense of loneliness. 'Befriending' and 'mentoring' may include individuals working alongside older people in an outreach service to support them in activities such as shopping, doctors' appointments or assistance with transport, or simply spending time together. The concept relies on the social interaction between worker and older person to reduce a person's sense of social isolation and loneliness (13).

GATEKEEPING:

Utilises volunteers that are both professionals and 'unconventional' community members to identify older people at risk of social isolation and loneliness (20). Community members can be any person within the community that interacts with older individuals a regular basis such as a postal worker, meter reader or supermarket worker. The volunteers are trained to recognise older people who may be isolated, or at risk of isolation and offer them support in connecting with appropriate services and community groups. This initiative aims to identify at-risk older people before they are in the crisis stages of isolation (20) with their individual needs at the fore-front of the care plan (21). This approach has been used across United States and some parts of Canada with generally positive outcomes, particularly in regard to suicide prevention (20).

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY (ICT):

Learning to use information and communicative devices such as a computer, iPad or mobile phone are noted to be potentially effective initiatives as they broaden the opportunities for older people to communicate with others (4,8). Internet access in particular has assisted in lowering the rates of social isolation and loneliness with email being one of the online communication activities being taken up by older people. A study found that 75 per cent of older people who reported feeling isolated later stated that their usage of an online educational website targeted at life-long learning for older people decreased their feelings of social isolation and loneliness (4). Despite arguments that technology has been responsible for creating distance, when used as part of a targeted approach in easing social isolation it can be an effective tool in keeping people connected and establishing new connections (23). A initiative recently trialled in Melbourne titled 'Growing Old and Staying Connected' provided older people the platform to share photographs and messages online with the use of an iPad. The inititative reported positive impacts on the wellbeing of its participants (23).

SOCIAL CLUBS AND COMMUNITY GROUPS:

Programs that are aimed specifically at men, such as the Men's Shed, are more successful in attract- ing men than generalised programs (9). The Older Men's Network (TOMNET) based in Toowoomba, Queensland, reaches out to men aged 50 years and over at risk of social isolation, loneliness and sui- cide. TOMNET is delivered through a team of trained older male volunteers and paid professionals, and offers programs including day trips, suicide prevention workshops, and

interest groups such as cards, chess and singing. Transport is provided for those with mobility issues (20).

WHAT ARE THE MOST EFFECTIVE APPORACHES IN FACILITATING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND REDUCING SOCIAL ISOLATION IN OLDER PEOPLE?

While there is a range of initiatives aimed at facilitating social connections for older people, there is a lack of evidence surrounding the effectiveness of those initiatives (4,13). However, there are several approaches that have been recognised as being more effective than others:

BUILDING ON COMMUNITY CAPACITY AND WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP:

The most successful programs involved recognising older people as community resources and working in partnership throughout the intervention. This involved facilitating a space where older people were self-empowered and had control and ownership over the design, delivery, and evaluation of the initiatives. These initiatives had the greatest integrity and success, and involved utilising the strengths of the older participants such as their skills, talents and knowledge (4).

GROUP SETTINGS:

Initiatives that seek to reduce social isolation and loneliness amongst older people are found to be more effective when they occur within group settings (8,9) or have a particular focus on socialising (13). Group settings create opportunities for participants to socially connect and develop supportive relationships with others. Relationships founded upon mutual support are beneficial in contributing to an older person's perceived self-worth and act as a reason to continue being social (8).

However, some people's mobility and geographical location limits them to individualised initiatives, some of which are reported as being effective (13).

RECOGNITION OF DIVERSE NEEDS AND INTERESTS:

'Loneliness is personal and one size will never fit all' (23). Therefore strategies and initiatives should suit the unique needs of the individual (21). This involves recognising the diversity between individual older people as opposed to viewing older people as one big group (6). Research suggests that initiatives offered within group settings should be wide and varied to accommodate the diverse interests, abilities and needs of older people (9).

PARTICIPATION AND CONTRIBUTION:

Research suggests that working and volunteering can help maintain physical and mental health. A study of older men living in Japan who worked less than 35 hours per week, found that their employment was having a positive impact on their overall health (23). A similar study in America of people aged 60 and over, found that the more people had to do, the greater their wellbeing (23).

Research suggests that many older people want to contribute to society, as well as to feel productive and useful (9). Volunteering has been highlighted as one of the ways that older people can continue to contribute to society as well as keeping mobile and socially active. It can build a person's confidence, sense of control and feelings of self-worth (23).

STAFF:

Paid staff and volunteers who work to support initiatives are most effective when they are trained to identify socially isolated people, and are resourced in their ability to support them in regaining social connections (14).

EVALUATION:

Evaluating existing social connection initiatives is imperative in understanding best practice (4). Initiatives need to be based upon evidence of what really works to reduce social isolation and loneliness.

METHODOLOGY

HOW WERE PEOPLE INVITED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE PROJECT?

Ensuring that as many people as possible had the opportunity to participate in the project and have their stories heard was determined as being of high importance. Making sure that people who use Mathers House knew the project was taking place and how to be part of it involved approaching the different programs Mathers House offered at the beginning of their weekly session.

In addition to this, posters were displayed around the upper level of Mathers House and flyers were available in the front entrance foyer for those who used Mathers but do not participate in any of the weekly programs. Four opportunities were offered to people to participate in a focus group although due to a low level of interest only one focus group took place.

HOW WAS THE QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTED?

To accommodate for a diversity of people with differing time schedules and degrees of willingness to engage in the project, multiple data collecting methods were offered.

Participants were given the option to participate in either a:

FOCUS GROUP

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

QUESTIONNAIRE

TELEPHONE INTERVIEW

WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE PROJECT?

All users of Mathers House, aged 50 years and over, were welcome to participate in the project. This included cafe diners, volunteers, program users and program facilitators. Paid staff were not invited to participate in the project.

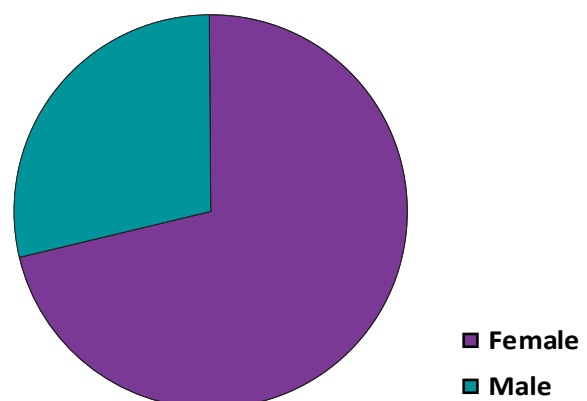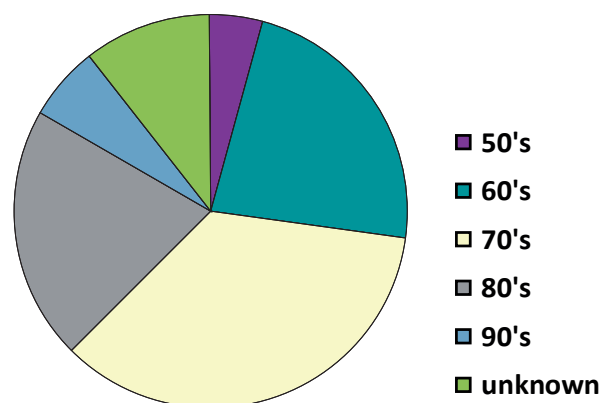A total of 66 people participated in the project.

- 33 people participated in the questionnaire
- 21 people participated in individual interviews
- 5 people participated in the focus group
- 1 person participated in a telephone interview

A 43 year-old person who took part an individual interview had their data removed from the project as they did not meet the minimum age requirement for participation.

AGE

As the project aimed to explore how Mathers House facilitated social connections for 'older' people, the age requirements were defined as those aged 50 years and older. While some participants expressed that they did not identify as being old, the age limit minimum was set as young as 50 years to reflect the age span of participants in Mathers House programs.

Due to an administration error five participants were not given their opportunity to supply their age, and two participants chose not to disclose their age. Of the ages that were captured, there was a 38 year span between the youngest participant, aged 54, and the oldest participant who was aged 92.

- ■ 50's
- ■ 60's
- □ 70's
- ■ 80's
- ■ 90's
- ■ unknown

- ■ Female
- ■ Male

WHAT QUESTIONS WERE PARTICIPANTS ASKED?

What is important to you as an older person?

Can you share your story behind why you first chose to attend Mathers House?

What was it about your experiences that made you want to come back? Or Does Mathers House help you feel more socially connected to others? If so, how?

How does Mathers House make your life better? *Or* Does Mathers House make your life better? If so, how?

Is there anything you would change about Mathers House or add to the program? If so, what?

WHAT DID THE PARTICIPANTS SAY?

WHAT ARE THE STORIES OF PARTICIPANTS AT MATHERS HOUSE?

The project participants were asked to share their stories about why they first chose to attend Mathers House. Despite the question being aimed at exploring what people were searching for when they first decided to come to Mathers, it was found that the question would often give insight into some of the experiences that an older person may have in today's society. It is important to consider that it was at the participant's discretion to disclose certain aspects of their lives. For example, only six participants disclosed that they were living alone but this does not mean that only six of the sixty-six people who participated in the project lived alone. Therefore, the figures are not accurate representations of people's experiences or situations.

Thirteen participants described that prior to attending Mathers, they had relocated to Hobart from where they lived in rural Tasmania:

> "When I retired, we moved straight out of the business and straight down here, and you're out of contact with everybody. Everybody you knew." (F 80)

Or from interstate:

> "When we retired, we lived overseas in different places and we tried to figure out where we'd like to live... we ended up in Hobart... we didn't know anybody. We came, we had no family here, we just arrived in Hobart because it was a nice place." (M)

Eight participants shared that they had lost partners:

> "After my husband died, it was very lonely. I was used to having somebody there at meal times." (F 80)

Eight participants observed that growing older has resulted in a loss of social connections with family and/or friends:

> "It's hard when you're older... When you've got school aged children, you make those connections." (F 71)

> "At my age, I know a lot of people feel that their friends are dropping by the wayside... once you reach your sixties, your friends may be dying or your friend's friends may be dying or getting sick. So there's a period of which your world does contract." (F 66)

Six participants stated they were living alone:

> "I've lived alone for many years. I've worked hard all my life until I retired when I was sixty-eight. And I never remarried because I didn't have time. I was just too busy trying to make a living and then I got past the stage of thinking that I'd like to remarry." (F 82)

> "I personally live alone and if you live alone, and you're not getting out a lot, you can get a bit depressed, just sitting at home with no interaction." (F 70)

Six participants reported experiences of age-based discrimination:

"So many people are condescending to you when you're old. Also, you become a missing person. You stand in a shop and you might be the person who's been there for ages and people simply go ahead of you and you feel like saying 'Am I invisible?' And this goes on everywhere all the time." (F 82)

"I don't know when it happens but there's a point where you become an old person and I'm not sure where it is. It sort of happened. If you go into a shop, you become ignored. Old people are ignored." (M 64)

Five participants experienced living with depression:

"I used to have little workshops for people... I was so used to so many people wanting to have contact with me and that has stopped. So I got to a point where I was getting depressed and I didn't even know I was getting depressed because I'd never ever been depressed. But I could feel myself sinking, sinking." (F 82)

"I had a heart attack... six months later when I went and seen my doctor, he said 'You're depressed' and I said 'No I'm not. I just look like this. I feel really happy inside. I just look miserable' and he said 'No, no you're definitely depressed'." (M 73)

Five participants spoke about having family but having limited opportunity to interact with them:

"I got two sons but they work and got families, and I haven't got any sisters or brothers... I haven't got any living relatives." (F 72)

Four participants talked about experiencing social isolation:

"I hadn't been engaged with the outside world for at least a year of my husband's illness and although I like to chat and things, I'm actually very shy so it's hard to push yourself when you don't know what's going on." (F 66)

Three participants identified as previously caring for somebody:

"My mum died nearly two years ago and I was her full-time carer for five years so I didn't go out." (F 57)

Three participants described that they were impacted by limited finances:

"I do have a bit of super but not much. And I've worked my whole life... if I think about it, I find that very frustrating that I do have to be really careful and I can't just sort of say 'Oh, let's go out for dinner' without really planning it and budgeting for it after a lifetime of work." (F 71)

"I was left with no money so to know if it was safe to spend ten dollars on something... things that involve spending money become a worry. I think for a lot of people who have a break in their partnership – a widow or whatever – there is at least for the first year a sense of 'Well, I got to be careful with money' and 'I don't really know whether I'm going to have enough to last me the rest of my life' so there is a certain sense of panic." (F 66)

One participant spoke about the experience of immigration:

"That's difficult for immigrants because you're never perhaps quite in the right place. You've got your original family in your original country, and yet you've got your family... here." (F 71)

One participant described living with the fear of loneliness:

"If you're an older person and you aren't interacting with other people, loneliness could be a really terrifying thing. Loneliness terrifies me - and I mean terrifies me. I can't see being lonely. I can't see a way." (M 71)

Participants' responses reflected wide and varied situations. Other experiences that participants raised included the difficulty of making new connections when socially anxious, the impacts of retirement upon keeping occupied, experiencing boredom, coping with loss and grief, and loss of a loved one who was their primary bridge for social connecting with others, and changes to cognitive ability.

WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO PARTICIPANTS AT MATHERS HOUSE?

To understand what participants valued in their lives, the simple question 'What is important to you?' was asked. Out of the wide range of responses that were given, words that described the need to socially connect appeared more than anything else.

Thirty-two people said that it was being socially connected, having friends, community and companionship that were most important to them:

"Getting out and meeting friends." (F 92)

"Everybody needs some sort of company." (M)

"Community and people is the most important thing. And having a network of sorts. At our age, we don't need any material things... realistically, the most enjoyment we get is from interaction, and various, and different interactions with different groups." (M)

Health was the second most common response with nineteen participants identifying it as important:

"Health... once your health goes, you're confined." (F 70)

"You feel better. It's both (physical and mental health). If you feel better physically, you're better in your mind." (F 72)

Physical exercise was pointed out by ten participants as being of importance:

"The dance classes apparently are very good for your mind. They make you think. They're exercise but they make you think too." (F 57)

Ten participants highlighted the importance of keeping active:

> "I try not to give myself time to sit around and feel sorry for myself... if you're sick and you say 'I have to go to...', you do feel a little bit better than sitting at home feeling sorry for yourself. I'm a firm believer of doing things." (F 70)

> "Keeping yourself active, keeping yourself interested in the community and therefore, by doing that, you're making a lot of friends, you're working with people and you're keeping yourself occupied and keeping yourself from getting down in the dumps." (F 80)

Eight participants said that family was important:

> "Social connections are really important but family, of course." (F 71)

Welcoming and safe venues and facilities were identified by seven participants as being of importance:

> "Community services such as Mathers House." (F 67)

> "Having something like this [Mathers House] to come to that has a variety of classes. You always feel included and I think people go out of their way to make you feel included when you come along to classes." (F 63)

Six participants said that happiness was important:

> "To be happy and to make people happy." (F 67)

> "Being happy in general. Things don't necessarily have to be perfect and it's not perfect anyway. I think to be happier than where you were is important." (M)

The continuation of learning was described by six participants:

> "Learning new skills and maintaining, growing brain cells through brain games, activities, classes - for example music, language, arts." (F 68)

Four participants talked about affordability being important:

> "To have somewhere to go to meet and join in with friends that does not cost a lot of money." (F 89)

Independence was highlight by three people as being of importance:

> "Not that I'm on my own, but it's important to me to have something that I do on my own." (F 72)

Three participants said that interacting with people of a similar age is important:

> "Sharing some interests with people of the same age is a bonus... the same culture, background and share some memories – same era." (F 68)

Three participants stated that volunteering is important to them:

> "Staying involved because once you leave work you're sort of at a loose end unless you can find yourself something to do. I'm quite keen on volunteering for community organisations." (F 70)

Also mentioned was politics, peace, financial security, having a positive attitude, feeling included, mobility, the arts, their pets, learning to relax, having support, having a routine and public transport.

WERE PARTICIPANTS SEEKING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS WHEN THEY CAME TO MATHERS HOUSE? WHAT ELSE WERE THEY SEEKING?

Participants were asked to share the story behind why they initially chose to attend Mathers House. This question was asked to prompt participants to identify what they were seeking when they first decided to come to Mathers House; whether it is access to a community nurse, to play Scrabble or because they wanted to meet people of a similar age. Approximately one third of participants stated that it was the programs that Mathers House offers that attracted them to the centre in the first place.

Twenty-one participants shared that the reason they came to Mathers House was to participate in a program:

> "We came here because of T'ai Qi. We had a friend who sent us the course guide and she always wanted to come along to T'ai Qi so she asked us to come with her." (F 63)

> "I had heard about Zumba so I Googled it and found Mathers House had a program going. A couple of friends from the eastern shore were interested too so we started a couple of years ago." (F 77)

> "I guess we thought it would be good to learn to play a musical instrument for ourselves and our own enjoyment but to be able to share it with others." (F)

Thirteen participants stated that coming to Mathers House was a way to meet people after relocating to Hobart:

> "I lived in Launceston, worked in Launceston, retired... so I decided to sell my house in Launceston and move down to Hobart... It was really important to make those social connections other than just family when I moved down." (F 71)

Twelve participants said that they came to dine at the cafe:

> "I usually come once a week on a Tuesday. I meet a friend. We have a coffee and a chat for a couple of hours. And then the taxi comes to take me home." (F 91)

Ten participants came simply wanting to meet people:

> "I can't see myself getting a job now so I think it's good to do things, to meet people." (M)

Eight participants identified the volunteering opportunities at Mathers House as a reason for coming:

> "I'd had a good career. I'd had a good job... I decided that I could do something for other people as well." (M 74)

> "I was looking for something to do and I can cook." (F)

Three participants hoped to meet people of similar ages:

> "It would be nice to have someone who was my peer... I'm being used very much as a grandma and that's nice that people recognise that I have worth but everybody needs a friend." (F 66)

> "I think one of the attractions here is that all the people are old, so you're in the same team or the same problem... Your problems or where you are, are different to other people so it's easier to talk to someone in the same situation than it is, like not knowing about getting married and having kids and having a mortgage, and what's happening in the other end. So it's not much point in talking to this lot because they're not interested in what you've got to say anyway." (M 64)

Two participants stated they were seeking to actively disrupt the risk of social isolation:

> "My husband died and then I was on my own, and that's a shock. If you're not careful, you can stay in that cycle because you stop doing things for a while and if you're not careful, you can just stay there." (F 70)

Two participants identified that coming to Mathers House was a way of delaying the potential onset of dementia:

> "I think that all of us at our age, we live in a fear of Alzheimers so you feel you should be doing something and you've got so many friends who've gone a bit strange, and you think 'I'd better do something'." (M)

> "You got to keep active... mixing with people. Otherwise you just don't talk to a lot of people. And that keeps your mind going, if you're talking and discussing, even if it's trivial things like everyday things. It's just keeping your mind going." (F 72)

Other responses included wanting a quiet space, to learn how to use a computer, to have independence, to fill the calendar, to hire a space for community functions, they were seeking a communal space or because friends brought them.

WHAT CHANGES DID PARTICIPANTS OBSERVE IN THEMSELVES?

Participants were asked if Mathers House had made their life better and if they had noticed any changes in themselves since participating at Mathers House.

Twenty participants said they had met people and made new friends:

> "I've got a core group of about half a dozen that I've been mixing with since I came here. We now play on Friday mornings through summer. We all go to the Botanical Gardens and play... that's come from meeting them here. I would never have met any of them any other way." (F 70)

> "You've got new people coming in all the time and you get to know a lot of people... So if you meet out on the street, they know you. They don't just walk by... they'll come up to you and speak to you because you've got to know them." (F 80)

Thirteen participants were able to identify changes in their self-confidence:

> "I wouldn't speak to hardly anybody when I first started here." (F 77)

> "I have made friends. I really have. And I'm proud of myself now... it gives me confidence in meeting new people." (F 59)

> "It stops me from being shy. It really does. It's the one thing and it's the one thing every week. When I know I'm coming here, I know I'm coming to a little friendly haven." (M 71)

Seven participants stated their lives were busier and they had more to look forward to:

> "I've been able to do a few good little turns that I wouldn't have been able to do." (F 82)

> "You forget your pains... because you're with people. You're doing something you like doing." (F 80)

Six participants said they had learned new skills and knowledge:

> "I'm finding out things I never knew about songs that I've been singing for fifty years... it makes you enquire; it makes your mind enquire again." (M 71)

Five participants felt happier:

> "I seem much happier in myself. Because I'm doing more. I'm meeting more people. You just feel better in yourself." (F 63)

> "I feel a lot more happier. I sleep better." (F 77)

> "You do feel better once you've been out and talking to people. Even if you just go down town and you run into someone and they'll come have a coffee and you sit down for half an hour and have a talk. It brightens you up completely." (F 80)

Four participants described how they no longer felt depressed:

"I've been a teacher for many years and been involved in the community for many, many years... People would shout at me 'Hello!' from across the street wanting to reconnect. I do miss that and I am quite sure that that loss has affected my health and so coming here, it's been a real uplift for me. I can tell you that the very first time I came, I became a different person. I haven't sung for years and I used to sing. I suddenly found after I'd been at meditation that I was singing. But not only was I singing but I didn't have this little squashed voice. I was singing from here and my throat was open and I was just astounded at the change... All of this welcoming – I don't mean 'fuss' welcoming. I mean being treated as a normal human being – has such a vast effect on me. I'm not depressed any more. It's lifted me out of my unhappiness." (F 82)

"I used to be depressed until I came here and now I've got over being depressed and I'm quite happy... it's the friends you make." (F 77)

Two people said it had made them more outgoing:

"It got us to do new things we never thought we'd do like playing in public and embarrassing our children." (M)

"It's made me more outgoing. I tend to be a bit reclusive. I have other things that I do, my own responsibilities n organisations and now I've been able to broaden myself out a little more and meet people that I normally wouldn't have met, and made contacts that I wouldn't ordinarily have met." (F 82)

Participants also observed that Mathers House had broadened their outlook, contributed to their feelings of self-worth and potentially delayed the onset or worsening of dementia.

HOW DID MATHERS HOUSE FACILITATE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS?

Participants were asked 'What was it about your experiences at Mathers House that made you want to come back?' Halfway through the data collection process, the question was re-worded so that it prompted participants to explore specifically social benefits from attending Mathers House. The updated question asked participants 'Does Mathers House make you feel more socially connected to others? If so, how?'

These questions were asked to encourage participants to explore what made Mathers House unique. Responses often painted a picture of some of the ways that Mathers House facilitated social connections and created a space that fostered positive social interactions. There were many different responses to this question and often participants were able to identify more than one thing about Mathers House that made them want to return.

Thirty participants said that Mathers House was welcoming, pleasant or friendly:

"The first time I came, it was quite scary to come into a room sort of cold but they made me feel very welcome very quickly... they asked me a little about myself without grilling me too much. They were just very friendly and open." (F 71)

"Everyone makes you welcome." (F 63)

"It's a nice space. It's sunny and everything. People are welcoming. It's just a matter of walking in and you say hello to someone and it goes from there." (F 72)

Twenty people said that the cafe gave them a place to meet with friends and enjoy good food and drinks:

"One of the nice things about playing mahjong and playing Scrabble here is the lunches we have where we all sit around together... it's lovely because it's like a big family." (F 82)

"It's an easy place to meet people. You can have lunch here and come in and have a cup of coffee... it does make you feel like you've got something." (M 71)

"There's not many around town where you can go in and sit down and have a cup of coffee and a chat. If you're in a restaurant, you pay your money and you're out." (F 91)

"People don't hurry you if you stop eating and start talking." (F 82)

Nineteen participants said it was the people:

"Some nice people I've met. Some I have known before. So you renew friendships in that way too." (F 90)

"The people. And they're not all one interest, they're not all one class. They're just a great mix of all sorts of people with different interests, different stories to tell, quite a few friendships, different skill sets, different academic levels, it's a mix." (M)

"You meet new friends... people shouldn't be lonely." (F 67)

Thirteen participants said it was because it's an enjoyable, happy and fun place:

> "Even when we come here and do things, we sort of laugh a lot because - you know – something might be a bit funny, or a bit fast, or we look up and see all those little kids laughing at us. All that's really good... and I'm sure it helps you keep healthy." (F)

> "I enjoy it. If I didn't enjoy it, I wouldn't have come." (F 77)

> "Playing in the mall... it's something that we never thought we'd do. We turned up wearing Hawaiian shirts and looking silly and be prepared to stand there playing ukulele and sing, and not run away... now we do it with other groups." (M)

Eleven participants found it to be an inclusive space;

> "It's just a great resource, accessible, not in any way elitist... anybody can walk in." (M)

Eleven participants said the staff were the reason that they returned:

> "The staff here do seem to go out of their way to be very helpful." (F 63)

> "It's where it is and who runs it. The staff make everybody feel welcome. Mathers House's big plus is that they've got people who want to do the work, who love people... I'm not emphasising enough how friendly they always speak to everybody. They usually know their names and if not, they're very clever. You never know they don't remember their name." (M 71)

Ten participants said coming to Mathers House became part of leading an active lifestyle:

> "I find looking forward to something... you know, 'What are you going to do the next day? Going to Mathers House.' You've got something to look forward to. It's good all the time." (M 80)

> "Once you get older, being organised helps everything. It just makes you want to get up and do things because you think 'Oh yes – I've got this today' and 'I've got that today'." (F 76)

Eight participants suggested it was the experience of being part of a group:

> "It's great doing exercise either by yourself or with a couple, but it's even better with a lot of people. It makes you feel better and you don't feel old." (F 72)

Eight participants shared that coming to Mathers was a way to fight loneliness:

> "How will I ever know if I'm ready unless you go do it? So if you get back into things straight away, and this is where this has been a godsend because I had people to come back to talk to, and I'm meeting people. You've got to get out amongst the community, amongst people." (F 80)

Seven participants noted that it was the learning experiences that made them want to continue coming:

> "School for Seniors was interesting with a wide variety of speakers. I stayed for lunch afterwards and got to know people." (F 90)

Seven participants said they were attracted to Mathers House because it was affordable:

> "The good thing about Mathers – because I'm on the pension – it's very reasonable. It's five dollars to join the book club. It's affordable." (F 71)

> "People love to come because it is price structured... a lot of people are on a very strict budget. Not everybody's husband leaves them a millionaire..." (M 71)

Mathers House's central location was not only appealing but easy to get to. This was mentioned by seven participants:

> "The whole facility is in a perfect position. People in the CBD... it's perfect for everybody to get here." (F 82)

Six participants said the physical exercise programs that Mathers House offered were a good enough reason to return:

> "All the ladies that come, they just enjoy the class and then they love to come up for their coffee. If they couldn't come for a coffee, something would be missing because that's part and parcel... we all sit round talking and I don't have anyone at home but I've got a variety of friends. But some of the ladies don't have a lot of friends and just by coming to the class and having a coffee, they tend to talk to people." (F 76)

Five participants stated it was the volunteers:

> They are very, very kind and rewarding and they're very efficient in what they do. In fact, one of them when she sees me walk in, she practically writes down what she knows I'll have." (F 82)

Four participants saw Mathers House as a place to meet similar aged people:

> "Sometimes it's nice to speak to someone that understands at the same level you are. Because I'm sure some of my kids think we're stupid... everything we do." (F 72)

> "When we have our relatives that come down, they're on their mobiles and stuff like that. They talk in a different language." (M 80)

Three people said that Mathers made them feel worthy:

> "When we come, we're welcomed in. It's not great extravaganza. You're just treated as a human being which is what you are - and I mean really, that does not happen everywhere." (F 82)

Two people said that Mathers gave people a place to meet both older and younger people:

> "There are two quite elderly ladies who belong to the book club and I really enjoy their company because I don't have any – of course – older relations here. I love to hear them talk about things that are beyond my experience." (F 71)

Other responses included the events such as Christmas and long luncheons, the quietness of the space and the practical facilities such as clean toilets.

WHAT COULD MATHERS HOUSE DO BETTER TO FACILITATE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS?

Participants were either asked 'What would you change about Mathers House or add to the program?' or 'Is there anything you would change about Mathers House or add to the program? If so, what?'

These questions prompted a wide variety of suggestions ranging from ideas for new programs to ways that Mathers House could reach more people in the community. Over a third of participants could not identify what they would like to see changed at Mathers House and offered no suggestions. Of those that did, the responses were largely suggestions of what could be added to Mathers House, rather than what needed changing.

Twenty-three participants stated that change was not necessary and that Mathers House should stay as it is:

> "Nothing should change. It is such a good program. I can't think of anything you could add to make it better." (F 77)

> "I'd keep it the way it is." (F 77)

Six participants wanted more physical exercise programs including Weights and Balance:

> "Encourage activities for younger seniors. More physical classes if possible, as bone strength is vital." (F 68)

> "I think the place does a pretty good job but it would just be nice to have the Weights and Balance." (F)

Five participants pointed out that Mathers House needed more exposure and could reach out to more people in the community than it presently does, including reaching out to the culturally diverse communities of Hobart:

> "I don't think it is viewed greatly. I think the majority of the Hobart population wouldn't know it exists." (M 74)

> "I do wonder about some of the people who are home people and they need encouraging to get out because once they get out, they'll have a great time. It's just getting them out and I always think they're the ones who need to be here, not people like me who can go out and push themselves and do things on their own. It's the ones who sit at home who've circumstances change and their lives have changed and they don't know how to get back into things." (F 70)

Three participants want more bus trips:

> "The bus trips that are organised seem to book out very quickly... have tried twice to book a trip and it was all booked out within two weeks of advertising." (F 68)

Two participants highlighted the importance of having activities that catered for a diversity of ages, generations and interests:

> "We probably need a bit more mental stimulation that doesn't entirely revolve all around handcrafts. Sometimes I think we need something else." (F 70)

Two people wanted Mathers House to have more laughs or more energy:

"There's nothing I can see here that allows me to break out of that isolation. I'm still just a nobody when I walk in here. I need a space that says anybody who drops in here is going to have a conversation - that it's not a silent environment. It's a noisy environment." (F 66)

Whereas one participant stated that Mathers House should remain a quiet place:

"If I'd come in off the street and thought 'I'll have a drink and read the paper or something', because of the amount of noise generated from the other people that were in the dining area, I would not have been able to do that. People liked to come in here because it was quiet. There was music in the background but they could come in, they could talk, there weren't children running around." (F 80)

One participant wanted to see younger people participate at Mathers House:

"There are more people of different ages coming in here, so it's becoming more of a community centre. The older people are seeing the younger people and the younger people are seeing the older people, and you're getting a communication not only between the older people but between the younger generations as well. I think it's nice because it helps both generations understand what's happening. It makes the place a bit livelier. It might create the different style of program. The older people will see what is happening in the world." (M 74)

One participant would like to see the dining area encourage communal dining through an interactive seating layout:

"When you walk in here, it appears you have to be sitting down having lunch. And when you sit at a table – even if you were happy to talk to somebody else – nobody comes and sits at a dining table if you're sitting at a two-seater table. Nobody's going to come and sit with you. So there needs to be more chairs that are grouped that look like 'Yes, you can just sit and have coffee.' There are some chairs but they're stuck back flat against the wall. It's not an inclusive thing – you could be sitting on a chair facing straight ahead and the world walking past you... If it were all one huge dining table, then people would probably get the idea that you eat and that you can come and sit next to somebody else and talk. But I think that it's very much that you come with someone you know and you sit and you talk with that person, and it's not conducive to getting to know people." (F 66)

One participant stated they would like to see the creation of smaller spaces for group programs:

"A couple of small rooms for the book clubs and things that need to be a little bit more intimate... It didn't work because it was too big a space for anything that needs personal discussion... a few little spaces that could be more intimate for people to actually sit and talk." (M 71)

One participant identified a possibility for Mathers House to collaborate with U3A (adult education):

> "Aim for a facility which can 'create a bridge' between U3A." (M 69)

Other suggestions for programs at Mathers House included tutoring classes, knitting, a drama group, a film group, a cooking program, an art program, greater mental stimulation and generally more variety in programs available. One participant wanted to see Mathers House open earlier while another participant wanted to see Mathers House remain open later in the afternoon.

A participant stated Mathers House could do more to engage people with its programs and activities and one participant said there should be more opportunities to feedback. A luggage-minding area was suggested by one participant and another suggested there should be more seating available while you wait for others. One participant shared they would like to see the price of the meals reduced and another said that more classes should be offered to avoid overcrowding.

CONCLUSION

DOES MATHERS HOUSE FACILITATE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS FOR THE OLDER PEOPLE MOST AT RISK OF SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS?

When asked 'What would you change about Mathers House?', many participants stated that Mathers House is largely invisible and under-utilised by the older community.

One participant expressed concern when he said:

> "It's amazing that with the size of Hobart, there's just this handful of people that come to Mathers." (M 68)

This raises the question of whose responsibility is it to publicise the facility and encourage participation. The question points to the need for collaboration between older people, community service sectors and all levels of government to address what is a growing issue within the older Tasmanian population.

It is recommended that Mathers House continue to work in partnerships with older people and draw upon the lived experiences of those who are living with social isolation and loneliness to inform further initiatives.

DOES MATHERS HOUSE FACILITATE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS BY RECOGNISING OLDER PEOPLE'S DIVERSE NEEDS AND INTERESTS?

Overall, Mathers House appears to accommodate for a variety of needs, interests and abilities. Some participants stated there was something for everyone at Mathers House. However, some participants thought that Mathers House could benefit from greater variety in their programs. One participant highlighted the need for services to adapt to the changing needs of generations as there is a significant difference between people in their eighties and people who are now turning seventy due to the different social, political, cultural and economical contexts they had lived through:

> "What was fine ten years ago for the seventy year olds is not fine for the seventy year olds today because we had a bit of a different life." (F 70)

One participant responded in a questionnaire the need to recognise diversity:

> "Lumping 'over 50s' together is a bit like putting teenagers plus 30+ together. There's a HUGE difference between 51 and 81 years of age! Also, much depends on health and lifestyle – physical and intellectual and social." (F 68)

Mathers House is observed to cater for a varied demographic of older people and should continue to provide an array of programs aimed at the needs of different generations while in consideration of the diversity between people in similar age groups.

The overall comments described Mathers as being affordable to participate at and therefore accessible. This included most participants who identified as having restricted finances, although one participant wrote that the increase in the price of meals meant they could rarely afford to visit Mathers.

Some participants stated that Mathers House could do more to reach out to those in Hobart's culturally and linguistically diverse community. This action would reflect the City of Hobart's Social Inclusion strategy that acknowledges there are social inclusion barriers for culturally and linguistically diverse people living in Hobart.

COULD MATHERS HOUSE DO SOMETHING DIFFERENTLY TO FACILITATE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS FOR OLDER MEN?

There was a large gap between the number of women who participated in the project and the number of men. This phenomenon is reflected in the general attendance of Mathers House. There could be multiple explanations for this such as the programs at Mathers House fail to attract men, or there are simply more women. In general, women live longer than men; therefore there is a greater representation of women in the community than men. This begs the question, what can Mathers House do to encourage more isolated men in the Hobart community to attend Mathers House and to receive similar benefits to those who participated in the project?

When the topic did appear in the project, a male participant suggested that:

> "They [men] probably look at it as something that men don't do. Maybe they just don't think it's[tai chi] dynamic. Or it's a women's thing. Particularly here - everybody's a bit older. They might feel they can't do it because of lack of mobility so they don't want to get embarrassed... it's not competitive and men tend to be a bit competitive." (M 64)

This may involve exploring ways of reducing the personal and structural barriers that prevent older men from participating, but at the same time accepting that community resources such as Mathers House are not appropriate for every person's needs, desires, interests and abilities. Regardless, having space available for older men to determine the programs that they need may see more males participating at Mathers House in the future.

DOES MATHERS HOUSE FACILITATE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS THROUGH PARTICIPATION AND CONTRIBUTION OPPORTUNITIES?

The volunteer program provides people with the opportunity to not only participate in but contribute to the daily operations of Mathers House. It was observed that volunteers had some of the most poignant responses and some were able to identify drastic changes within their confidence, feelings of worth and levels of happiness since volunteering at Mathers House. It was observable that the volunteers not only supported Mathers House but in return, Mathers House supported their wellbeing. Some volunteers shared that they had made connections inside Mathers House that extended to life outside Mathers House.

DOES MATHERS HOUSE FACILITATE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS THROUGH COMMUNITY CAPACITY AND WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP?

Mathers House provides volunteering opportunities within and beyond the facility such as the Hobart Older Person's Reference Group (HOPRG). HOPRG is an advisory committee for the City of Hobart which eventually feeds back into Mathers House. The group is made up of older people with an interest in representing the voices of older people within the community.

Working within partnerships with older people directly challenges the often harmful and socially exclusive assumption held by some younger people that older people are burdensome, dependant and delicate (23). These judgements undermine the capacity of older people to be productive and worthy members of the community (23).   The City of Hobart and Mathers House actively challenge these stereotypes and assumptions by recognising ways that communities can benefit from the skills, knowledge and talent of older people.

DOES EVERYONE WHO PARTICIPATES AT MATHERS HOUSE MAKE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS?

Approximately one third of participants explicitly expressed they had established new friendships or maintained old relationships through Mathers House. While most participants could self-identify a spectrum of positive changes within themselves since participating, it was a minority of people who specifically identified that they had made social connections at Mathers House. In saying that, there were very few people who expressed that they found it difficult to make connections at Mathers House.

One participant shared their experience of the barriers they faced when engaging with others at Mathers:

> "There are several groups that are quite 'cliquey' – it took two years for someone to say just hello." (F)

While Mathers House seeks to create social connections, factors such as group dynamics and the personalities of participants can continue to be a barrier for some. Those who identified as living with shyness or social anxiety may not be able to create social connections as easily as others; however, Mathers House can continue to play a role by offering a diversity of programs that suit people's personalities as well as by promoting Mathers House as a safe, inclusive and welcoming space.

HOW DO THE WORKERS AND FACILITIES AT MATHERS HOUSE FACILITATE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS?

Often participants would describe how they would come upstairs for a coffee and a chat after finishing their physical exercise program downstairs. Some of those who took part in the book clubs and in the games programs shared how they teamed their weekly program with a lunch with other program participants prior to the activity starting. The cafe at Mathers House appeared to give participants the opportunity to consolidate the social connections they made in the programs. Others appreciated that they could relax and take their time talking to others in the cafe without the pressure of feeling like they were in a place of business, such as the experiences of those who were familiar with being rushed out of cafes after finishing their coffee or meal.

Having facilities in the CBD such as clean toilets should not be overlooked. Studies have reported that in some cases, an absence of clean and available public toilet facilities may influence a person's decision to leave the home (7). Having safe and clean facilities such as toilets may be viewed as a given but should not be overlooked in their ability to bring people to a space.

Staff and volunteers at Mathers House were often praised for their approachability, friendliness, warmth and sensitivity. While participants identified that staff dynamics can heavily influence the culture of a place, current staffing was reported as having a positive impact on people's desire to continue participating at Mathers House.

In conclusion, the benefits of Mathers House may not always be evident on the surface but the programs, people, venue, cafe and location contribute to participants' health and wellbeing more than what is visible from the surface. Mathers House ticks the box in regards to many of the approaches used in the most successful social connection initiatives such as the opportunity for volunteering, activities in group settings, catering for varied interests and abilities, effective staff and working in partnership with older people to build upon the strengths and resources of the community members.

Mathers House facilitates social connections in a myriad of ways and when they intersect, they work to create unique experiences for the participants. It is difficult to pinpoint how the factors alone facilitate social connections, with one participant describing Mathers House as having 'evolved' to become what it is today. However, listening to the voices of the people who participate in the space has unearthed just some of the ways that it does.

REFERENCE LIST:

1. Australian Psychological Society, Ageing Positively http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip_sheets/ageing/#s1   LINK DOESN'T WORK

2. City of Hobart, Older People http://www.hobartcity.com.au/Community/Older_People

3. Beer, A, n.d., Worse than Cigarettes and Drink: the Impact of Social Isolation on Older Australians, Centre for Housing, Urban and Regional Planning, The University of Adelaide, https://www.adelaide.edu.au/churp/presentations/Worse_than_Cigarettes_and_Drink.pdf

4. Findlay, R 2003, 'Interventions to reduce social isolation amongst older people', Ageing & Society, vol. 23, pp 647-658, https://lemosandcrane.co.uk/resources/Ageing%20and%20Society%20-%20Interventions%20to%20reduce%20social%20isolation%20amongst%20older%20people%20-%20where%20is%20the%20evidence.pdf

5. Kobayashi, Cloutier-Fisher & Roth 2009, 'Making Meaningful Connections: a Profile of Social Isolation and Health Among Older Adults in Small Town and Small City', British Columbia Journal of Ageing Health, http://jah.sagepub.com/content/early/2008/12/12/0898264308329022.full.pdf+html

6. Pate, 2014, Social isolation: its impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of older Victorians, COTA, http://www.cotavic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Working-Paper_Social-Isolation.pdf

7. Nicholson, N.R. 2012, 'A Review of Social Isolation: an Important but Under-Assessed Condition in Older Adults', The Journal of Primary Prevention, vol. 33, pp 137-152, http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10935-012-0271-2

8. World Health Organisation, 2015, World report on ageing and health, Luxembourg, http://www.who.int/ageing/publications/world-report-2015/en/

9. Pettigrew, Donovan, Boldy & Newton 2014, 'Older people's perceived causes and strategies for dealing with social isolation', Ageing & Mental Health, vol. 18, no. 7, pp 914-920, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13607863.2014.899970

10. Cacioppo, 2014, Loneliness is a major health risk for older adults. In presentation at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

11. Lifeline, What are loneliness and isolation, https://www.lifeline.org.au/ArticleDocuments/235/47176%20Lifeline%20FS%20Overcoming%20Loneliness%20and%20Isolation.pdf.aspx

12. Dury, R 2014, 'Social Isolation and Loneliness in the elderly: an exploration of some of the issues', British Journal of Community Nursing, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 125-128, http://www.magonlinelibrary.com/doi/abs/10.12968/bjcn.2014.19.3.125

13. Grenade & Boldy 2008, 'Social isolation and loneliness among older people: issues and future challenges in community and residential settings', Rehabilitation Disability & Ageing, Australian Health Review, vol. 32, no. 3, http://www.publish.csiro.au/AH/pdf/AH080468

14. Commissioner for Senior Victorians, 2016, Ageing is everyone's business: a report on isolation and loneliness among senior Victorians, Victoria State Government

15. Franks, Burnett & Evans 2012, 'Risk Factors and Prevention Strategies for Suicide Among the Elderly', Alabama Counselling Association Journal, vol 38, no. 2, pp 32-42, http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1016448.pdf

16. Parliament of Tasmania 2016, Joint Select Committee Inquiry into Preventative Health Report no 7, http://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/ctee/Joint/Reports/JSCPH%20FINAL%20REPORT%20160311.pdf

17. City of Hobart, n.d., 'Social Inclusion Strategy 2014-2019: Everyone has their Place', City of Hobart

18. Beyond Blue 2014, 'Social connectedness research report: final report', https://www.beyondblue.org.au/docs/default-source/research-project-files/bw0286-social-connectedness-final-report-pdf?sfvrsn=2

19. Jopling 2015, 'Promising Approaches to Reducing Loneliness and Isolation Later in Life, Age UK