

COVID-19:

# COTA Tasmania Community Conversations

MAY 2021



## Where did we go?

We connected with community organisations and participants of their programs in:

- Ouse Community Health Day Centre, Ouse
- Geeveston Community Centre (GeCo), including the Dog House Men's Shed
- Scrubby Hill Farm, Geeveston (volunteers and customers)
- Karadi Day Centre, Goodwood
- St Helens Neighbourhood House, St Helens

Over the course of our visits, we spoke to approximately 55 community members and volunteers (including 15 staff) about their experiences. We participated in activities being run at the centres to keep discussion informal and were welcomed positively at each visit. Older participants were keen to talk, to be heard and to let us know how they had coped with the additional measures and stress the pandemic had caused.

The mix of health and community neighbourhood centre participants provided a broad age range and combination of abilities and experiences, with a larger proportion of female participants and staff providing input.

### *Why did we visit these locations?*

We wanted to capture the voices of communities in more rural / remote areas, as well as to re-engage with neighbourhood houses that have been so central to providing ongoing support during COVID-19 whilst services were on hold and organisations closed. We were interested in hearing how communities that have more limited access to services and amenities in rural areas managed or coped and capture the views of staff working within neighbourhood centres.

## What did we hear?

Overwhelmingly, we heard from older people that they have been resilient and adapted well during these complex times. One community member noted **'We've done what's been asked of us'** (GeCo participant), with an overarching theme of pulling together in rural places **'we rallied together.'** (GeCo participant)

In the more rural areas, community members spoke of being used to greater isolation than those in urban areas, feeling that the adjustment to restrictions and measures was not felt as greatly in their community **'it's not been that different for us than it was previously.'** (Ouse participant)

In all locations, people spoke of life being 'slower' and 'quieter' with some experiencing issues initially in getting groceries and other essentials, but that very quickly services and friends kicked in to support them.

## What did we see?



In all locations and organisations visited we saw a strong sense of community, of connection to one another and to the local services provided within the community. People felt a desire to 'stick together' with lots of creative ideas attempted in order to tackle the issues that came with restrictions and social distancing measures. In the more rural communities, there was often expressed a natural ability to adapt and be resilient with the changes that came with COVID-19: **'We know we can manage, we've got through the bushfires, which were harder to deal with mentally.'** (GeCo participant)

We saw and heard a real sense of confidence in the community's ability to support one another and work out ways to cope and adapt during times of change.

## Volunteering

During COVID-19 many people stopped actively volunteering, in line with government advice to not be out in public unless for essential activities (health appointments, groceries, physical activity). Coupled with the unhelpful messaging around additional risks for older people based on age, (not on individual circumstances), has meant that many older people have been hesitant to return to regular community activities, volunteering included.

## What did people say were the greatest challenges of the past year since the COVID-19 outbreak?

Undoubtedly for all communities we visited, managing uncertainty and the increased isolation that came with COVID-19 were the greatest challenges that impacted on mental wellbeing and physical access and inclusion within their local areas.

Having strong connection to the organisations we visited, as well as the feeling of being closely connected to that organisation appeared to have acted as supportive factor that acted to combat this risk.

## What were the 'silver linings' or positives to come from COVID-19?

Several community members spoke of increased notions of gratitude both for the COVID-19 response to date, of our relatively low rates of infection and outbreaks, and of our state's geographical location. Some spoke of having spent more time on projects/clearing out tasks – that they'd been putting off.



A sense of community connection and opportunities to re-think what it means to be involved in community was also spoken of. One person commented that COVID-19 '*...is a wake-up call –*

*people are too interested in individual rights and themselves.'* (Dog House Men's Shed participant)

## Key findings

- 1. Clear messaging is vital** – trusted, reliable sources, variety of mediums, with support to navigate information for individual needs.
- 2. Connection is important** – social isolation has increased during COVID-19 and creativity is key to ensuring connections are maintained and also created in new ways.
- 3. Digital literacy and inclusion** – is a real issue in Tasmania and an added impact for consideration in communication and messaging strategies. Investment in further 1:1 supports for older people to increase confidence with technology is recommended.
- 4. Don't underestimate people's strength and resilience** – ask them what they need, what they are managing well themselves, and let communities support one another.
- 5. Placed based responses are key** – in line with the recommendations in the recent PESRAC report (specifically recommendation 35).

## What can we learn from older people's experiences?



It is important not to forget that older adults have lived experience of navigating change over their lifetime and want to be involved in forming ideas and plans that impact on them. Older people are individuals, and we should not be labelling all older Tasmanian's as vulnerable or less valuable.

Older people we spoke to clearly had a high level of resilience and in the communities we visited appeared to have managed well during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Clear messaging with strong reasoning behind decision making is important, especially as many older people commented they do not have access or feel confident to access computers / internet to search for additional information.

Responses to COVID-19 and future recovery strategies need to include the thoughts and views of older people, the impact on their lives, access to services, connection to community and needs around digital inclusion.

