



# **The Changing Needs of Co.As.It.**

## **Seniors Social Groups**

### **Research Report**

This report was prepared for Co.As.It. by  
Praxis Public Relations Pty Ltd



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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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## **GLOSSARY OF TERMS**

This report contains some Italian words in describing the activities of the groups in order to maintain the flavour of the groups themselves. This glossary is an aid to understanding some of the terms and descriptions for non-Italian readers.

*Feste*            Special days when the groups celebrate Mothers Day, Fathers Day, Christmas etc.

*Tombola*        Bingo.

*Panini*           *Bread rolls.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Over the past 15 years, Co.As.It. has fostered the development of social groups for well-aged people within the Italian community. Over this period, the membership has aged and the needs and circumstances of members would have likely changed considerably.

Co.As.It. has provided guidance to groups and committees including training on administrative issues and where called upon, has assisted groups in resolving conflicts. The organisation has also helped groups achieve self-determination and it continues to provide support through a team of experienced and dedicated aged care workers. The groups are autonomous entities with their own committees, and are based on the model used by mainstream senior citizens groups.

In April 2002, Praxis Public Relations Pty Ltd was commissioned to undertake a study into the changing needs of social groups and to identify:

- The types of needs across the groups
- The nature and level of existing support
- Service gaps
- The current support through Co.As.It. and potential structures
- The staff's capacity to fulfil groups' needs

This report presents the findings of that study and ideas for consideration by Co.As.It. to meet emerging and future needs. Information was sought through an extensive survey of group members about their personal situation and involvement with the group; focus groups with members; and discussions with committees.

The study represents the first major appraisal of social groups in Sydney, combining quantitative data to demonstrate the extent of members' participation, and qualitative data to develop an understanding of members' perceptions, concerns and capacity to maintain their involvement with social groups.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The study, which commenced in late April and concluded in early June, involved the following methodologies:

- A survey of social group participants to capture demographic data;
- Focus groups with 8 – 10 participants in each group; and
- Discussions with committee members in each group.

Social groups were notified of the study through letters signed by the President of Co.As.It. which explained the scope of the study, its intent and introduced the consultant. The context of the study was presented as the first comprehensive assessment of changing needs among social groups. Group presidents were asked to read the letter to the members and to seek their participation.

The 16 groups involved in the study included:

Blacktown	Brighton-le-Sands
Dee Why	Ashbury
Willoughby	Parramatta
Auburn	Leichhardt
Punchbowl	Ashfield
Burwood	Bondi
Hurstville	Miranda
Earlwood	Bankstown

All three components of the study were carried out with each group on the same day, alleviating the need for the consultant to call back on separate occasions, thanks to the cooperation and organisation of the group committees. The consultant was accompanied and introduced to the group by Co.As.It.'s aged services workers who reiterated the need for the study and how it would be administered.

### **2.1 Survey**

A questionnaire was developed in consultation with the project reference group and administered to participants of the social groups. The questionnaire captured basic demographic data such as year of arrival, age, gender and the participant's period of

involvement with the group, mode of travel to the group and frequency of participation. It also sought information about participants' health and preferred activities through tick boxes with gradations to identify the extent of health conditions and levels of enjoyment in respect of activities. Open-ended options were provided for participants to elaborate on any ideas or comments. The questionnaire was translated into Italian by Co.As.It. staff.

Most participants were able to complete the survey on their own, however Co.As.It. staff and the consultant were on hand to assist. Participants were also offered the option to complete the survey at home if they preferred and they would be provided with an addressed and stamped envelope. Only two participants took up this option.

In executing the survey with the first few groups, it became evident that some participants attended more than one group. In this case, they were asked to complete the survey once so as not to inflate the number of responses. There were a few refusals, among some men who simply did not want to disclose information or considered the exercise an imposition on their card playing time. Survey data was entered and analysed by the consultant using the SPSS program generating frequency data and cross-tabulations.

## **2.2 Focus Groups**

On completion of the questionnaire, 8 – 10 people were invited to participate in further discussion with the exclusion of committee members. The exception to the rule was the Blacktown group where all 25 members of the group participated in discussion including the group leader. This group comprised entirely of women and had a different dynamic to the other groups. The group met monthly instead of weekly like most of the groups.

Efforts were made to balance the gender representation in groups however some groups comprised more women or more men. The number of participants fluctuated with some groups only with 6 people and others with 12 – 15 people. Discussion groups were conducted in Italian and lasted around 40 – 50 minutes and individual summary reports were developed by the consultant.

## **2.3 Discussions With Committees**

Discussions were then conducted with group committee members to ascertain the 'committee' perspective on issues facing the group, the health of participants, the structure and management of groups, and the needs of committees and their relationship with Co.As.It. Here also, the discussion guide was developed jointly with the Reference Committee and summary reports were generated by the consultant.

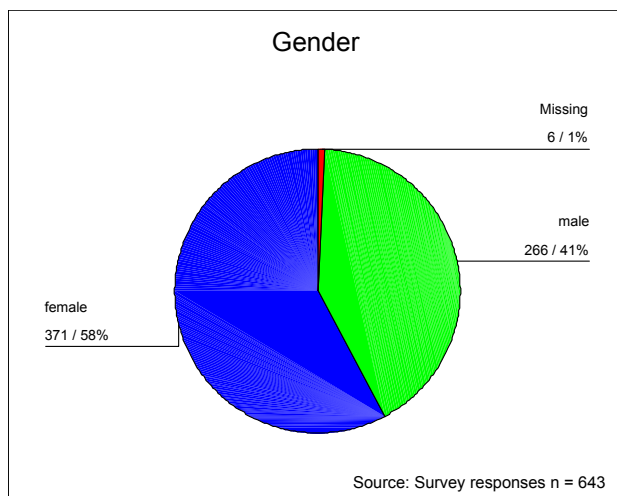
### 3. ANALYSIS OF SURVEY RESULTS

In total, 643 participants responded to the survey across the 16 social groups and summaries to those responses are presented in this section.

#### 3.1 Demographics

##### 3.1.1 Gender Breakdown

The majority (58%) of survey respondents were female and 41% were males.



##### 3.1.2 Age Cohorts Within Groups

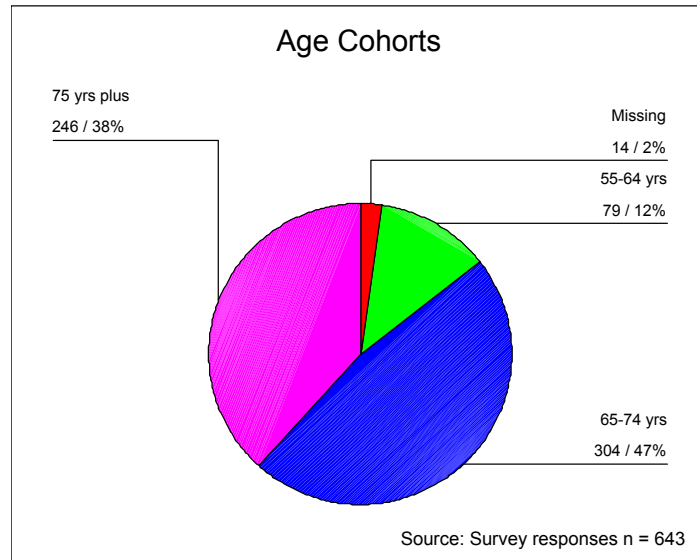
The youngest member of the groups was aged 48 years and the eldest was aged 94 years.

Categories identified in the above pie chart are commonly used by the ABS and other authorities including Co.As.It. in defining age cohorts and include:

*Well-aged: 55 – 64 years (a few younger members have been collapsed into this category;*

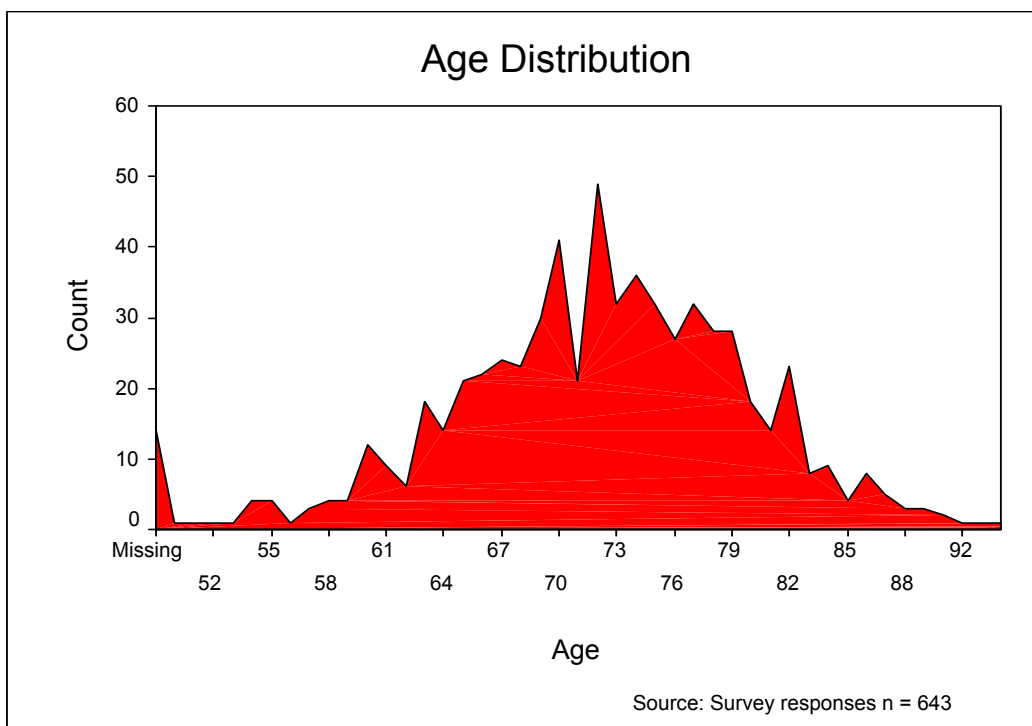
*Aged: Those aged 65 – 74 years; and*

*Frail aged: Those aged 75 years and older.*



The largest proportion (47%) of group participants is 'Aged': 65-74 years, followed by 'Frail Aged': 75 plus years cohort (38%). The number of 'Well-aged' participants made up approximately 12% of all participants.

### 3.1.3 Age Distribution



The age distribution graph shows the bulk of social group membership is skewed towards the mid to late seventies, with a follow through of members aged in their mid sixties to early seventies. It also shows a diminishing well-aged membership suggesting that current levels of membership may not be sustainable in future years. This view is supported by the long-term membership claimed by many of the older members, who had joined groups en-masse when aged in their early sixties.

The chart also suggests that within the next 10 years the bulk of members will fall into frail age and potentially, are likely to require higher levels of support in terms of transport and general access to social groups.

### 3.1.4 Age Ranking of Groups

The table below shows 39% of group members fall into the frail age cohort (75+ years). Some groups, notably Earlwood, Parramatta and Miranda have an older age group comprising 50% or more of the membership, while several have in excess of 40%.

Group ID	Group	Number of survey responses	% Frail Age 75+ years
1	Blacktown	18	33
2	Brighton le Sands	47	40
3	Dee Why	30	40
4	Ashbury	45	40
5	Willoughby	52	30
6	Auburn	20	40
7	Leichhardt	23	8
8	Punchbowl	29	34
9	Ashfield	39	28
10	Burwood	53	35
11	Hurstville	42	35
12	Earlwood	70	51
13	Bankstown	49	42
14	Bondi	47	40
15	Parramatta	47	53
16	Miranda	18	50
	<b>Total</b>	<b>* 629</b>	<b>39</b>

NB: \* Represents the number of respondents to the question on "Age"

### **3.1.5 Participation**

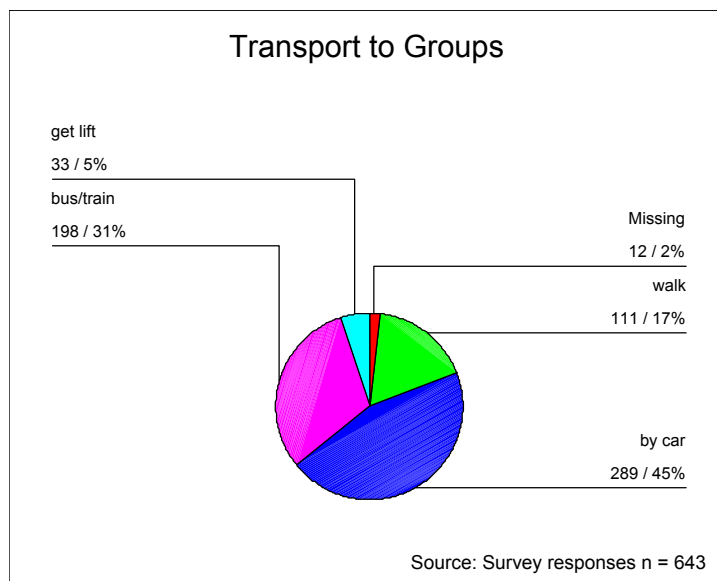
The length of participation in the social groups, as per the table below, shows a significant proportion (64%) at entry (up to 5 years) and up to 10 years. As expected, the proportion of longer-term members would taper off as they age and become frail. On current levels, the transition of newer members into older age has implications for the future and function of groups.

<b>Years of Membership</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Proportion (%)</b>
0 – 5 years	224	34.8
6 – 10 years	186	28.9
11 – 15 years	109	17.0
16 years +	70	11.0
* Missing value	54	8.3
Total	643	100.0

Survey results show that the vast majority of members (90%) attended groups on a regular weekly basis, or in the case of a few groups that meet fortnightly (Miranda) or monthly (Blacktown). Ten percent (10%) reported attending the group on a casual basis, and in focus groups, explained that ill health or other family commitments like childminding sometimes prevented members from attending regularly.

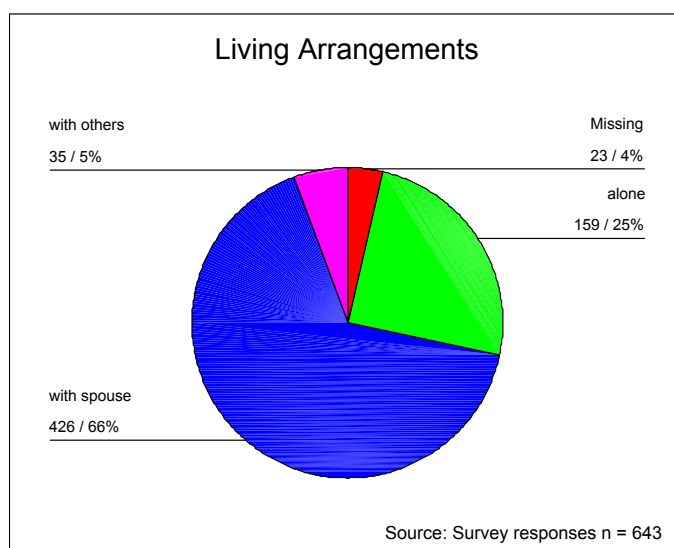
The survey showed that members responded strongly (86%) to being with friends and (81%) being with others who spoke Italian.

### 3.1.6 Mode of Transport



The motor car is the main mode of transport (45%), followed by public transport (31%). Seventeen percent (17%) walked to groups, and only 5% got a lift. Some respondents identified a mix of travel modes which included both walking and using public transport and these responses were collapsed into 'Use public transport' response.

### 3.1.7 Living Arrangements

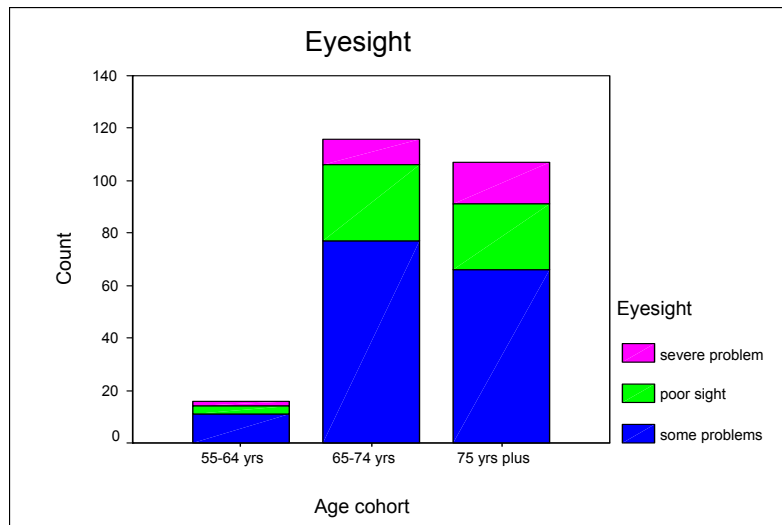


Most respondents (66%) lived with spouses with a much smaller proportion (25%) living alone. Only 5% of respondents identified that they lived with family members or people other than spouses.

### **3.2 Health Issues**

A series of questions in the survey inquired on the health status of members. These related to conditions generally experienced as part of the ageing process.

#### **3.2.1 Eyesight**



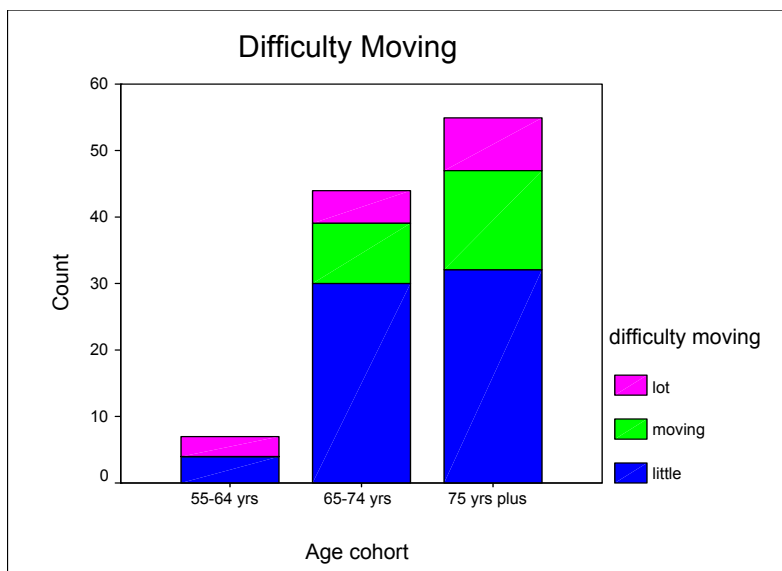
Overall, 245 respondents (38%) reported some problem with their eyesight with 28 (4%) claiming they had more severe problems.

### 3.2.2 Walking



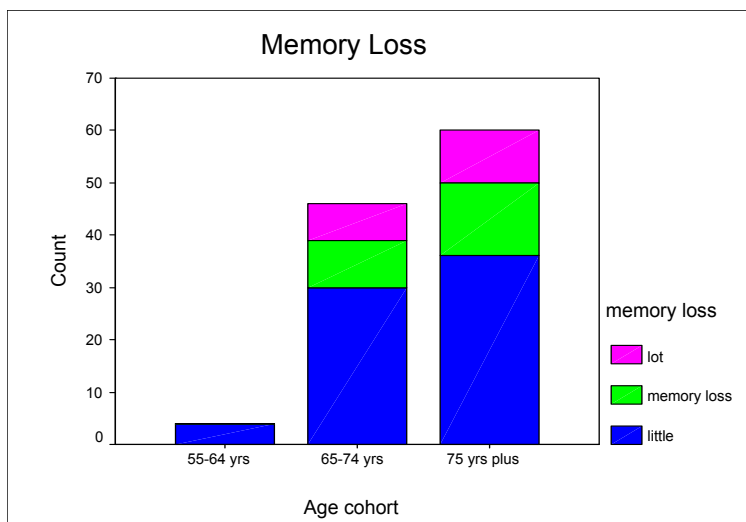
As expected the above chart indicates greater difficulties in walking among older frail aged respondents. Two hundred and ten respondents (33%) stated they had difficulties in walking, 40 of which (6%) had more severe conditions.

### 3.2.3 Difficulty Moving



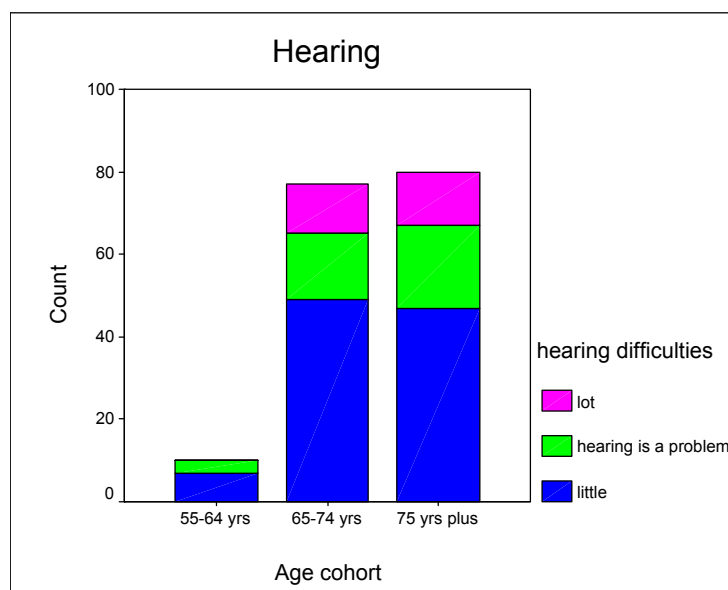
One hundred and seven respondents (17%) said they had problems in moving generally, 17 of which (3%) experienced more severe problems. Problems in movement attracted a higher response among older respondents.

### 3.2.4 Memory Loss



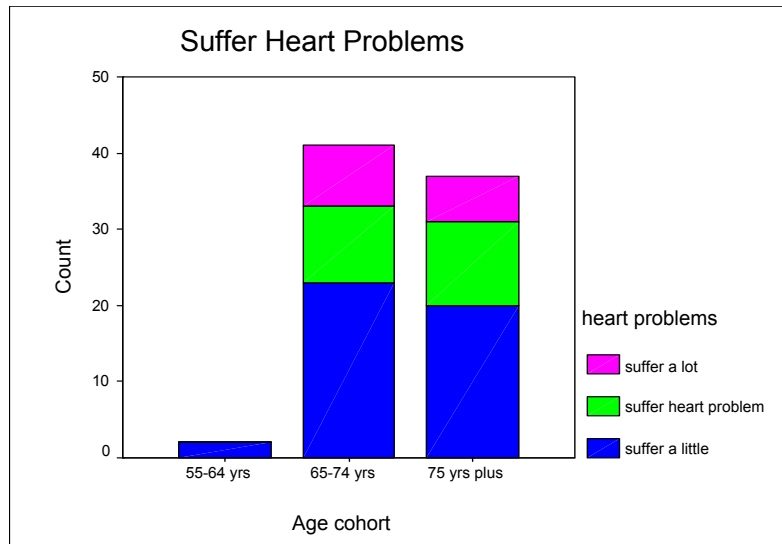
Memory loss was reported by 113 respondents (18%) and was more prominently among older frail aged respondents and 17 respondents (3%) stated they had experienced more severe memory loss.

### 3.2.5 Hearing



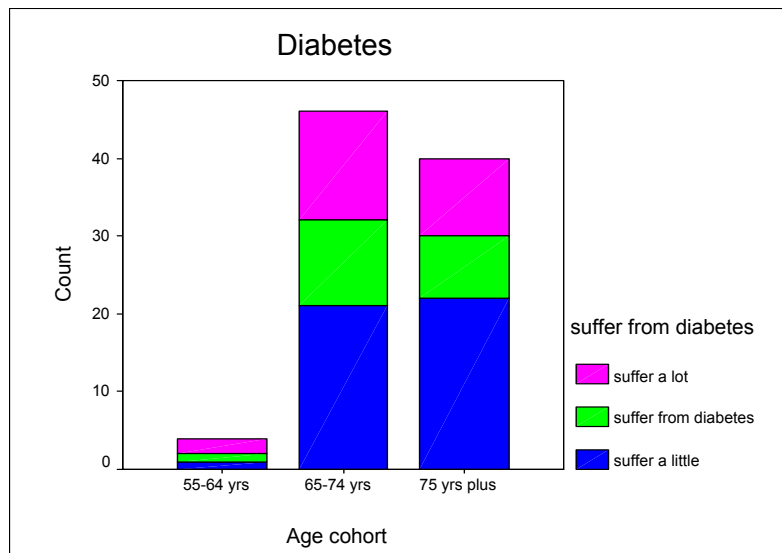
The hearing chart indicates problems with hearing more prominently among older respondents. One hundred and seventy one respondents (27%) claimed to have hearing loss, 27 of which (4%) had more severe hearing problems.

### 3.2.5 Heart Problems



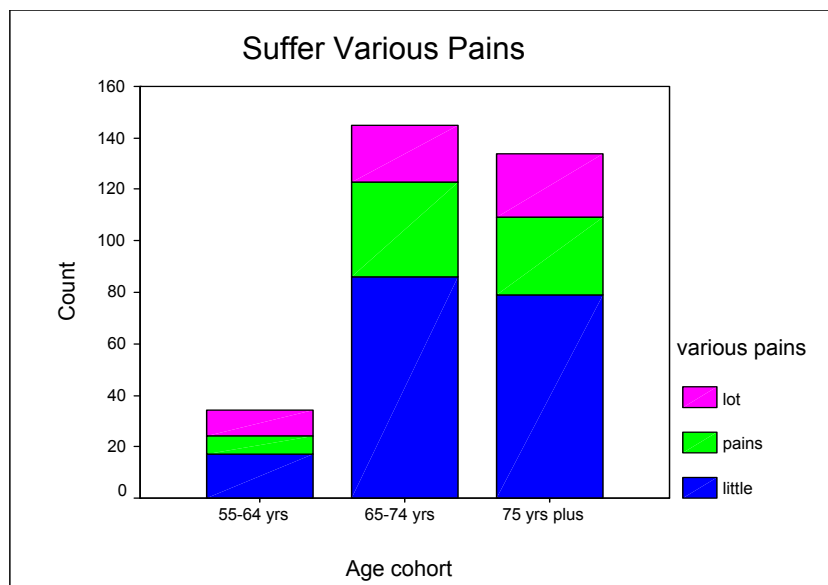
Eighty respondents (17%) suffered from heart conditions, 14 of which (2%) had more serious heart conditions. The question did not however, ask for specific conditions and would encompass related conditions such as angina, heart disease, blood pressure etc.

### 3.2.6 Diabetes



Ninety respondents (14%) claimed they had diabetes, 26 of which (4%) considered their condition to be more serious.

### 3.2.7 Suffer Various Pains



Three hundred and twenty respondents (50%) reported various pains, 57 of which (9%) reported more severe pains. There is a significant jump in the reporting of pains from the well-aged to aged categories, even though the well-aged group is significantly smaller.

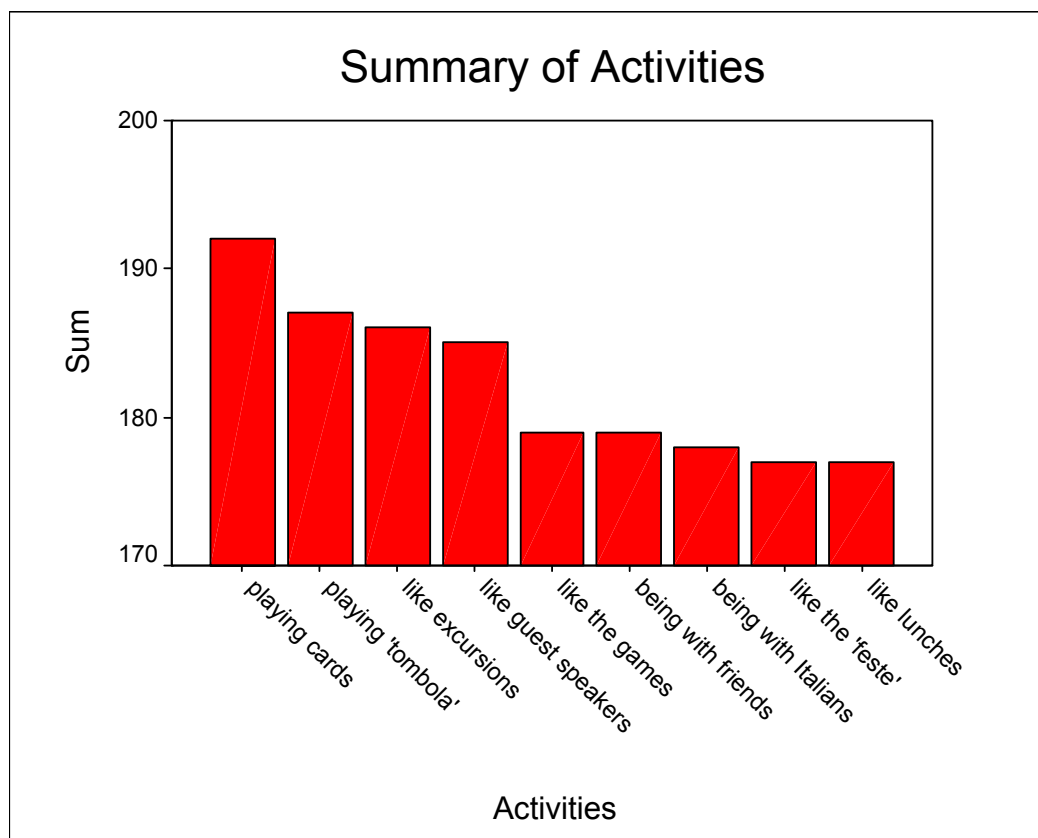
The summary table below prioritises the extent of health responses obtained through the survey.

Condition	Number	Proportion (%)	Severe
Aches & pains	320	50	57
Poor sight	245	38	28
Difficulty walking	210	33	39
Poor hearing	171	27	27
Low energy	147	23	14
Memory loss	113	18	17
Difficulty moving	107	17	17
Diabetes	91	14	26
Heart/related conditions	80	12	14
Low will to participate	63	10	9

### **3.3 Activities**

In terms of rated preferences, playing games, particularly cards and tombola, were the most popular pass-time for group members. Excursions also rated highly, although this should be taken in context that in some groups, respondents would like to go on more excursions than at present.

While other activities identified in the chart below may be rated lower, the researcher believes that these play an extremely important social role to participants, a view supported by the discussion groups.



## **4. RESPONSES FROM FOCUS GROUPS**

This section provides a summation of responses from 16 focus groups on self awareness, behaviours, perceptions and thoughts for the future of social groups.

### **4.1 Reasons For Participating**

#### **4.1.1 Social Network**

The social groups play a major social role in the lives of participants. The resounding response from participants was that the groups provided an opportunity to get out of the house and participants valued the interaction with people of the same cultural background with whom they shared common interests. The groups provided a contact point where people could chat, exchange recipes, play tombola or cards, pass their time and generally – as a way of being together.

*“Qui siamo come una famiglia” – (“Here we are like a family”)*

Many participants said they also attended other social groups to play tombola and cards, and went on their excursions. A fewer number of participants said they sometime attended their local RSL club to play bingo, or went to the Marconi and Fogolar Furlan Clubs – where these clubs were in close proximity.

Participants looked forward to their weekly meeting with other people. Very few participants said their participation was on a casual basis and when they did, it was usually due to some external constraint like minding their grandchildren or having to visit doctors. Some groups met less frequently like Blacktown (monthly) and Miranda (fortnightly). Here too there was an eagerness to participate. Participants gave the impression that going to the group was the social highlight of their week that was time away from family matters.

While being with other Italian speakers was a strong drawcard a few participants said this was not imperative. They felt comfortable mixing with non-Italians in other clubs and social settings.

#### **4.1.2 Countering Isolation**

Focus group participants who were less mobile or lived alone, said the groups offered more than just a place to go, it drew people out of their isolation, and in this context, groups provided more of a therapeutic value through regular social interaction. For older participants or those in poorer health, the importance of the group became even more critical as a social outing.

*“Almeno posso uscire di casa” (“At least it gets me out of the house”)*

Some participants cited examples of others who had been widowed and had become isolated at home or restricted their contact to their immediate family. These included participants who had dropped out because of bereavement and new women who had recently been widowed and introduced to the group by another member. Joining or rejoining the group after bereavement helped restore people’s confidence and reassert their independence.

#### **4.1.3 Activities**

- Tombola was the most popular of all the games and was played predominantly by women members (67%), whereas men preferred to play cards (46%). These two activities were generally the main attraction to the groups. People were very content with the activities offered in their group, and the younger more mobile members often circulated among different groups to participate in tombola and card games.
- Some groups had evolved around specific purposes. For example, the Punchbowl group came together as a prayer group and has maintained that focus through choice, whereas, the Leichhardt group came together as a health group.
- Participants were in favour of more excursions although, some groups no longer organised excursions due to the cost, or failing health and mobility of members. Most respondents said they’d like to go on more excursions, but they also understood that the cost of bus hire was a major obstruction.

The Burwood group, one of the larger groups, organised extended trips – such as a 10-day trip to the Gold Coast with accommodation, travel and food expenses included. Most groups limited their excursions to day trips to Manly, Bowral, Blue Mountains, Wollongong and visits to major clubs for lunch. Some older

participants said they would not attend excursions because of their age or health conditions.

The cost of hiring a coach and driver for the day limited the capacity of groups to conduct excursions and a common question from focus groups was if Co.As.It. could help meet the cost of transport hire for an annual excursion.

Some of the more mobile members would also attend excursions and outdoor activities arranged by other groups.

- A few of the groups offered light exercise or had at some stage made arrangements for a trainer to provide exercise sessions. The response from participants varied – some liked the idea of introducing light exercise sessions, while others felt it would be too difficult to organise and would cut into their time for tombola and cards.
- The response to visits from outside speakers depended on the presence of local information services and the capacity of group committees to organise visits. The emphasis placed by local councils, health services and other organisations on community information and outreach services varied with some areas like Canterbury and Willoughby being more active in information provision. A few groups reported no or minimal contact with local services.

While the survey results supported a preference for guest speakers (72%) the response by focus group participants was one of ambivalence suggesting that visits from guest speakers were secondary to the groups' social function and games related activities.

- Lunch was an important feature of group meetings and people contributed to lunch and refreshments through entry fees charged by all groups. Fees were generally two to three dollars to pay for panini, coffee, tea and biscuits.
- Feste to celebrate Mothers Day, Fathers Day, Christmas, picnics and outings, were also popular and any surplus from entry fees were topped up to pay for food and catering of special events.

Overall members were highly satisfied with their group and did not want to see major changes in the way things were run. They were generally pleased with their committee and although many respondents would have preferred more excursions, they fully understood the cost restrictions. They were also satisfied with the level of contact they had from Co.As.It. and with the workers' visits.

## **4.2 Venues**

Venues were either council facilities or church halls and cost arrangements varied from group to group, with the exception of the Leichhardt group that meets in Casa d'Italia. Some groups were granted use of council facilities at no cost as the result of lobbying by some members to their local mayor or councillors sympathetic to the group's needs.

Other groups paid the hire fees to council. Venue hire posed problems for smaller groups – for example, the Auburn group with a small membership of around 20 people uses a meeting room in the new Council facility. The small number of members can barely raise the money to pay the fees. Groups that pay fees suggested that Co.As.It. could provide some financial assistance to cover venue hire.

The use of church halls was often the result of negotiated mutual benefits whereby groups had free access to halls in return for fund raising support for the church. In these instances, committee members usually had pre-existing affiliations with the local church.

The Ashbury group was concerned that there was no telephone in the centre for emergency use and they'd had two occasions when they required an ambulance after a member had collapsed, and had to call upon neighbouring houses to use a telephone.

In some of the medium to larger groups, participants complained that there was no capacity to separate the card players from the tombola players as both parties were noisy and disturbed the concentration of the other. Some women complained about the vulgar language used by male members while playing cards. By and large, venues were accessible for disabled and older people.

Overall, groups were content with the way their group operated and with their committee leaders. A few groups recalled minor disputes between members or situations where some members had been disruptive. By and large, these issues had been resolved within the group through the intervention of committee members. Participants in a few groups had cited past disputes between members that may have been politically driven and were disruptive. In these situations, the committee and Co.As.It. had intervened to restore order.

## **4.3 Health Status**

According to focus group participants, most members suffered from one thing or another. Some members had dropped out of the group because of ill health, or were unable to participate on a regular basis. Members frequently attended doctors' appointments and

were afflicted by a range of conditions including arthritis; general aches and pains, diabetes and some had heart problems.

Poor health was identified as the main barrier to future participation in groups. Members had noticed that some older members, or members with chronic health problems had stopped coming to group, or attended less frequently.

In terms of health information, only a few of the groups reported having visits, although infrequent, from health promotions officers from the local area health service who had presented information on healthcare issues.

#### **4.4 Mobility**

Groups identified mobility as the key determinant for participation. As members aged or became incapacitated by illness, reduced mobility would make transport an important consideration. Almost every focus group recalled someone who could no longer attend the group because they could no longer drive, or were too frail to use public transport.

They urged Co.As.It. to consider assisting older members with transport – perhaps a minibus to pick people up and drop them off at home. The facilitator further probed participants' knowledge of transport related and transitional services like Day Care groups, community transport schemes and council buses.

Some participants mentioned Day Care services in the area, but had no specific knowledge of those services. They had heard of, or knew someone that had gone to a Day Care group but could not elaborate with any further detail.

No one knew any information about community-based transport schemes. A few participants were aware that their local council operated buses, although only one participant had tried to book a bus for an excursion only to be told that buses were booked many months in advance and that hirers had to provide their own driver.

Parking was raised as a problem in accessing some groups, for example Bondi and Parramatta where parking restrictions in the area forced people onto public transport.

Younger, well-aged participants generally drove their own vehicle and regularly frequented other groups.

#### **4.5 Co.As.It.'s Role**

Focus group participants had a broad knowledge of the relationship between their group and Co.As.It., but only a few participants were able to enunciate Co.As.It.'s specific roles and functions. On prompting, they identified Co.As.It.'s role in assisting groups with elections, and they recalled visits by Co.As.It. staff.

Only a few participants were able to articulate Co.As.It.'s advocacy role for the social groups and on issues affecting the Italian community. Generally, participants did not show any depth of understanding about other support networks and services in their local community.

Participants reported that on average, Co.As.It. workers would visit 2 – 3 times a year to present information on special topics, or in relation to Mothers Day and other special events. They spoke highly of the workers who were helpful and responded to any inquiries from members. They also recalled participating, or being invited to attend special events at Casa d'Italia.

## **5. RESPONSES FROM COMMITTEES**

Much of the discussion with committee members concurred with what members had said about the plight of older frailer members and what their needs might be in the future. The discussions also provided information on the history of the group and administration.

### **5.1 Participation**

In most cases committee members reported that the groups were largely stable and that members attended regularly. Responses reflected those given in focus groups with members, the major motivation being social interaction between people in the similar situations.

In most groups, if members were absent through illness or hospitalisation, the group would sometimes organise someone to visit or contact them to enquire on their wellbeing.

All the groups had a long history and development, many of which had formed around 20 years ago. Some groups had moved from their initial venue into larger settings as the group grew, such as in the case of the Ashbury group which split from the Lakemba because of size. Committee members, like some member participants had long associations with the social groups, and felt a very strong emotional connection.

### **5.2 Noticeable Changes in Group Membership**

In terms of member numbers, most groups had remained relatively stable and the loss of members was generally balanced by the entry of new ones. A few groups however, reported a diminishing membership. The Auburn group had an attendance of around 20 members and the area's demographics show that the Italian population is in decline. That group has an older age profile and in the opinion of its president, will soon become unsustainable.

All the committee discussions demonstrated an understanding that members' health needs would increase over time and that their ability to participate was dependent on health and mobility. Committees could easily refer to recent members who had dropped out of the group, or attended infrequently or in some cases, had recently passed away.

Committee members emphasised the importance of transport to keep the more frail members coming to the group. Most committees would like to see some assistance with transport provided through Co.As.It., local councils or through government assistance.

Like the group members, committees were no more enlightened about Day Care and other support services in their locality, and it was evident that very few people had endeavoured to tap into local community services and resources. Individual members knew that councils and other community groups might be able to help, but few could articulate the type of assistance and services available.

### **5.3 Relations Between Members and Committees**

Earlier focus group discussions with members showed strong support for their respective presidents and committees, and the same level of support was reinforced openly by committee members towards their president.

Committees generally comprised of 5 members, under the leadership of a president, based on the commonly used constitution that had been provided by Co.As.It. The president was generally a long-serving member, usually a male. In some committees, there were more formal roles such as treasurer and secretary, but in others, these roles appeared to be nominal only, and the president appeared in control of all business affairs. In many groups, committee members were women, often relegated the responsibility for organising the games, preparing lunches and refreshments.

Almost all committees reported that from time to time, there were minor conflicts between members, or between 'disruptive' members and the committee. These types of issues were resolved through diplomacy and simply talking through the problem. The nature of these disputes was often based on misperceptions such one person feeling that other people were treated more favourably by others, or where there had been a clash of personalities.

One committee cited a situation where a member had made allegations about the handling of finances among other issues. Co.As.It. was eventually called upon to resolve the matter, resulting in that individual's expulsion from the group for his disruptive demeanour. None of the committees reported any current problems.

#### **5.4 Support Needs of Committees**

Discussions with committee members displayed some issues with the ability of leaders to cope with the demands of the groups, ability to direct and knowledge to respond to future challenges. These views were reflected in comments made by some focus group participants about their leaders.

The popularity of some presidents meant that they had led the group for most of its existence. And while members held the president in high esteem, age was starting to take its toll on some leaders. Committee members expressed the frustration that while people were just happy to participate as members, no-one wanted to play a greater role. They also recognised that 'new blood' needed to come on to committees to make them more dynamic.

Generally, committees were content with the support role that Co.As.It. played through its workers, and with the annual election process, but there was generally no further depth to what type of support they might need from Co.As.It., other than financial. Even in prompted discussion about Leaders Day, the purpose of the day was not very well articulated other than people saying it was useful.

Given that most of the groups are incorporated under Co.As.It., a few committee members did not fully comprehend that under incorporations law, grants from local councils could only be made to them via Co.As.It., the incorporated body. Co.As.It. would receive and administer the grants on the group's behalf. In a few groups, committee members could not understand fully the reasons for this arrangement and expressed some frustration at having to go to Co.As.It., a third party, to access grant funds.

## **6. ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The characteristics of group members generally correlate with those of older Italians in the community, and it is difficult to consider the results of the research on social groups, in isolation to the needs of older Italians, the catchment from which the groups draw their membership.

As members age, their ability to participate and support needs become more critical. The long-term view is that Co.As.It., and individual social groups, will need to reconsider their capacity to assist older members. Over coming years, the bulk of the current membership will become skewed towards frail age and groups will be faced with the prospect of losing members; or adjusting their role to a more 'day care' like function. The sustainability of some groups will also become critical because as the survey data suggests, there is likely to be fewer new well-aged members to replenish the groups.

The study also acknowledges variations between groups and recommendations provided in this report represent broader responses to groups' needs from a collective perspective. Implementation of any recommendations should also be informed by Co.As.It.'s in-depth knowledge and history with each group with regard to their disposition and capacity to adopt recommendations.

The following analysis is based on data obtained from the survey of members, focus group discussions; discussions with committees, Co.As.It. staff and Reference Group members, and the researcher's own observations.

The structure of the analysis and recommendations are stated as two key streams, namely:

1. Within the context of Co.As.It.'s global perspective in which the organisation plays a leading role in highlighting the significance of social groups and the plight of older Italians in order to mobilise political support and resources to meet their needs; and
2. At a micro level where Co.As.It. can work jointly with the social groups to refocus and empower them to respond more effectively to the needs of older and chronically ill members, and to consider the long-term viability and roles of social groups.

To facilitate our understanding of the make-up of groups member profiles based on the researcher's observations are provided as reference points.

## **6.1 Member Profiles**

- **Well-aged couples** are generally more mobile than other members and they attend groups predominantly as a social outlet where they can mingle with other Italian speakers, play tombola, cards, participate in excursions and attend festive days. Many couples circulate among different groups around Sydney, and although they may have a preferred group, there is no strong allegiance to any one group nor are they inclined to become active at committee level.
- **Well-aged women** attend groups, with or without their partners, and are generally more strongly aligned to a group in their immediate locality. They tend to be active within the group and task focussed, often taking a role in food preparation, organising events and some participate at committee level. Their outlook is more community oriented and some are actively involved in local church or benevolent organisations.
- **Well-aged men** whether alone or with spouses, attend group predominantly as a social outlet and a venue where they can play cards. Unfortunately, their enthusiasm for card playing makes it their singular focus and they are unlikely to participate in other roles or contribute to the group in an active sense.
- **Frail aged participants** also attend groups for social interaction although there are varying degrees of mobility that determines the level of attendance and participation in group activities. The older or frailer they are, the more they tend to observe rather than participate in activities. As can be expected, those who are less mobile are a small proportion of the membership and there is a dependency on others for transport, either another group member or a family member.
- **Group leaders** vary in their demeanour. Some groups have older, long-standing leaders, usually a male, who have the broad respect of members due to their seniority and long history with the group. Unfortunately, some are unable, or unwilling, to surrender their position to other younger members. While other groups have younger, dynamic leaders who are more motivated and capable of enthusing the membership.

## **6.2 Co.As.It.'s Overarching Role**

Co.As.It. plays a leading role in assisting social groups to function and actively provides assistance through bilingual aged care support staff. And while the groups operate as autonomous entities, they fall under Co.As.It.'s umbrella with a common constitution and with similar administrative arrangements.

### **6.2.1 Re-Asserting The Needs Of Elderly Italians**

Co.As.It. continues to advocate on behalf of the Italian community and particularly, on the needs of the frail elderly both within its structure of social groups and in the broader Italian community. It has done this successfully with all levels of government and the organisation has secured support through grants for aged care services and other social programs administered by the organisation. And while government welfare programs have recognised that the Italian community is rapidly ageing, the needs of elderly Italians are facing increased competition from other ethnic communities as they reach maturity and compete for the same finite resources.

The challenge facing Co.As.It. is to re-assert the community's needs on the basis of population size and the critical mass that is passing into frail age. This is largely a political challenge to win support and resources commensurate to the community's needs.

The mobilisation of resources should be directed towards extending Co.As.It.'s Day Care program or Italian specific Day Care in areas that Co.As.It. cannot service as there is an evident need among social groups, a need that will progressively increase as the proportion of frail-aged members grows.

The presence of a significant Italian constituency in most regions of Sydney and the role of that community in local affairs is a strong political lever to lobby for access to community based services such as community transport, day care, respite services, home care, home nursing and other services that will extend people's ability to participate more fully in their communities and not fall into institutionalised care.

The objective of any initiatives should be to make services more responsive to the burgeoning needs of elderly Italians and to develop a level of cooperation between services and Italian social groups to facilitate social interaction by older members and to assist their transition into frail age.

**Recommendations:**

1. *Future actions in meeting the needs of social groups can be underpinned by a re-assertion of the needs of older Italians by lobbying key State and Commonwealth ministers, MPs and local councillors to raise awareness of the problems that face this section of the community now and in the foreseeable future. Lobbying efforts could be supported by the contents of this report and ABS data to reinforce calls for additional Day Care facilities and staff for the Italian-Australian community.*
2. *A similar strategy should be adopted in lobbying for additional funding as part of any submission process and in direct discussion with program managers at Commonwealth, state and local government levels.*
3. *Services at the regional and local level could be approached jointly by Co.As.It. and social groups representatives either on a one-to-one basis and/or by staging a forum to present the findings of this report to aged care workers, HACC service workers, HACC forums, community transport services etc.*
4. *The above points could be supported by a detailed strategic plan developed by Co.As.It.'s Community Services Team Leader and aged services workers.*
5. *There is a need to raise awareness of an ageing generation of Italians in the broader Italian community, with emphasis on the resource requirements with the view to generating sponsorship for specific aged services programs within the Italian community. This could be achieved through publicity in Italian media and through fund-raising events for specific aged care support benefits.*
6. *A detailed communications and sponsorship plan could be developed jointly by Co.As.It.'s aged services staff, the Community Services Sub-Committee and Marketing Officer.*

## **6.2.2 Co.As.It. As The Change Agent**

While content to remain autonomous entities social groups value their relationship with Co.As.It. and accept guidance by its workers and executive. Clearly, Co.As.It. is the lead agent for staged changes over time. Feedback from discussions favours the autonomous arrangement of groups, but concurrently, there is an insinuation of a 'wish list' for Co.As.It. to have a greater role in supporting and resourcing groups with such things as money for excursions, or direct services like buses to pick-up frailer members.

### **6.2.3 Consolidation**

While most groups are presently sustainable the future is likely to see a diminution in members and the number of groups. There is a need to carefully consider the role of social groups and to make plans for the transition of some groups. Of more immediate concern is the future of groups whose membership is rapidly diminishing, due largely to demographic changes in their immediate locality – such as the Auburn group which has a small and older membership and is unlikely to be sustainable for too much longer.

### **6.2.4 Need for Day Care Services**

There is a clear need for an extension of Co.As.It.'s Day Care program to meet the needs of some of the older members of social groups who are frail and sometimes dependent on others to come to group and to participate. This need will grow over time as more and more members enter the frail age cohort.

While there are some mainstream day care services operated through councils and other groups in the community, there is a strong preference for Italian specific services, and these would be best delivered through Co.As.It. which already has the administrative structure to support such services. Providing language specific services would mean that frail age people could still maintain a level of social interaction with people who speak their language and are able to relate to more readily.

### **6.2.5 Reconceptualizing The Role Of Groups**

There are major implications for the long-term viability of groups brought about by a net decline of Italian migration and the socialisation of the second generation into mainstream society. In smaller groups and under current arrangements, this generation of members is likely to be the last.

For all intents and purpose, second generation Italian Australians have increasingly adopted mainstream norms and in older age are more likely to participate in general senior citizens groups and local sporting associations rather than Italian specific groups. This has been the experience of major sporting associations like the former APIA Club and the Marconi Club, originally built on a strong Italian patronage but now having to appeal to a broader patronage to survive.

There may be opportunities to broaden the scope of some groups to engage that second generation of Italian-Australians, some who are themselves in the well-aged cohort, on

their Italian heritage as a point for involvement with the groups or as sub-groups to work on heritage projects.

The determination of groups' roles can be a sensitive issue as groups value their autonomy and self-determination. Discussion with select groups could be raised in closed consultation with committees.

*Recommendations:*

- 7. At the Community Services Sub-committee level, Co.As.It. could consider transitional arrangements for groups that are under threat by declining membership and enter in consultation with affected committees.*
- 8. As a long-term strategy, Co.As.It. might consider the devolution and extension of cultural activities such as the Italian heritage program to larger groups in western, southern and northern Sydney. This could be trialed as a pilot project in forming localised Italian historical societies linked to an existing social group where member interest may be stronger. Potentially, this could be a rallying point for the involvement of members' offspring and younger members of the Italian-Australian community.*
- 9. The project could be guided by Co.As.It. and potentially, involve the development of cross-generational projects funded by local councils, and arts funding bodies. Co.As.It. could investigate the availability of funding and prospective projects.*

### **6.2.6 Skilling Up Committees**

Observations of some committees showed a desperate need for changes in leadership, but no-one from the broader membership is stepping into committee positions. Comments from some committees and their presidents support this view, but these comments should be understood in the context of the personalities that offer them. In some cases, observations made of committee members and their interaction with members suggested that their preparedness to welcome new blood was tempered with a desire to control and consolidate one's role as President. It should be understood that in this generation, the role as president offered some status in the group and in the immediate Italian community.

To support future sustainability, it is apparent that committees would need to adopt a more active role in meeting members' needs and maintaining the viability of groups. This requires leadership skills and the ability to direct groups beyond their traditional tombola

and cards based activities. They need to develop a more proactive outlook in order to be relevant to a changing Italian community at the local level, an issue discussed later in this analysis.

*Recommendations:*

- 10. Co.As.It. should review the shared constitution of groups in regards to the role and period served by committee with the view to limiting the period served by office bearers or possible rotation of positions. The review might also consider the role that may be played by past presidents in honorary positions.*
- 11. Leaders Day should continue to be promoted to committees along with key aspects of effectively managing a community organisation.*

### **6.2.7 The Role of Workers**

Co.As.It.'s aged workers play an integral role in liaising and assisting social groups through a range of issues, dealing with inquiries and day-to-day matters concerning the groups. Changes arising from this report will largely fall on workers to implement and they must be prepared to enter into a cycle of sometimes, delicate negotiations to see some changes through. Workers would also continue to monitor developments in the groups and actions arising from this report.

It is not envisaged that the role played by workers would change significantly, other than to play a greater advocacy and lobbying function which will bring workers in closer contact with services and other agencies. Even if funding applications for the extension of the Day Care program are successful, it is not envisaged that the role or demands on existing workers would change in the next few years. Additional staff for an extended Day Care program would have to be factored into funding submissions.

### **6.2.8 Reinforcing Co.As.It.'s Role**

As highlighted earlier, discussions with groups and committees demonstrated a lack of knowledge about support services at the local or regional level, limiting the groups' ability to seek local assistance. The converse is desirable where groups are able to assert their needs to the appropriate agencies and therefore come a step closer to self-sufficiency.

Similarly, there is a need to reinforce Co.As.It.'s profile and role among group members. While most members knew there was a connection between Co.As.It. and their group, few articulated the important role Co.As.It. plays in advocating on their behalf at the

political level, and providing direct services to the community. In fact, many people were unaware that Co.As.It. also operated Day Care groups.

*Recommendations:*

12. *Co.As.It. staff could conduct information presentations as part of their visits to groups to familiarise members with the organisation's history, role and range of services.*

### **6.3 Strengthening Social Groups**

#### **6.3.1 Prioritising the needs of the elderly**

Discussions with social groups and committees revealed an awareness of older members' needs, but little concerted action beyond empathy. Members were basically resigned to the idea that they too would age and as their health failed, they would have to drop out.

The main focus of the social groups is to provide 'social' activities that are major drawcards to the groups. Also, the time of committee members is largely occupied with basic administrative tasks, managing the group, preparing and tidying venues, arranging activities and the occasional excursion or festa. The personal needs of members are of a secondary order and not currently part of the groups' functions. Some members keep an occasional contact with former members who may be housebound or hospitalised, but there is no evident action in helping older, frail members make the transition into day care or support services.

#### **6.3.2 Self-help**

Reprioritising the groups' thinking on the needs of older members may be a contentious issue in some groups where members do not see themselves playing an active support role for others. But self-help can be as simple as forming car groups or arranging home visits. Where practical, committees should encourage a more active involvement with older, frailer members. Groups would also be well served to assert their needs to local councils and services, particularly in relation to accessing community resources including council buses and community transport services.

### **6.3.3 Information Needs**

Responses from members and committees to specific issues like health, transport and the future of groups revealed a lack of information about support services in their immediate localities. Very few participants were able to articulate any specific information to prompts by the facilitator about home care, community transport, council programs for the aged etc.

There were mixed responses from groups about information provided by local councils and health workers, although services in some areas were more active than others and presenters had visited groups. Other groups found it difficult to access information about services and even harder to access services and facilities. Members cited examples where they had tried to access council buses but were told that other groups had long-standing bookings and there were waiting lists.

Generally, there was little promotion by local services to Italian social groups which raises questions about access to information as a pathway to services. As a comment by the researcher, some services tend to take the simplest forms of communicating with the community, and visits to ethnic groups are sometimes perceived as too difficult because of the language barrier. The reality is that there is usually someone in the Italian groups who speaks English well and is capable of conveying information to members. A more serious issue is the 'exclusivity' that some groups hold over community assets, again raising access and equity issues in respect of the management of those resources.

At committee level, Leadership Day proved popular, but in some groups, there is limited understanding of reporting requirements associated with incorporated associations and could not understand why Co.As.It. had to be involved in administering grants that were meant for their organisation. This issue further reinforces the need to encourage younger, more active people onto committees.

#### *Recommendations:*

- 13. Social groups would benefit from a presentation of this report's findings in a summarised and translated format – perhaps during visits by Co.As.It. aged workers.*
- 14. Social groups may benefit from the development of a directory of health, aged care and related support services as a regional level, with service descriptions in Italian. Directories could be based on information supplied in council community directories, or even jointly funded by councils and Co.As.It. as a project.*

15. *Presentations by speakers from local services could be jointly initiated by Co.As.It. and group committees after topic preferences are discussed and prioritised with members.*

16. *Where social groups are denied access to services and community resources, members should assert their right to equal use of such resources through complaints processes, and where necessary, to elected officials of councils and to service administrators.*

#### **6.3.4 Transport**

Transport will become the critical factor in facilitating and extending the participation of older people in their social groups. Some focus group participants said they had tried to secure transport services through local councils only to be told that they were fully booked. Access to community resources can become an issue of concern if one group in the community has almost exclusive use of such resources, and there are strong grounds for any group to assert pressure on elected officials for councils to consider additional resources.

While participants also suggested that Co.As.It. play a direct role in resourcing and operating transport services, this needs to be considered within the context of extending current Day Care arrangements which can only be practically accomplished through further funding.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

### *Recommendations:*

1. *Future actions in meeting the needs of social groups can be underpinned by a re-assertion of the needs of older Italians by lobbying key State and Commonwealth ministers, MPs and local councillors to raise awareness of the problems that face this section of the community now and in the foreseeable future. Lobbying efforts could be supported by the contents of this report and ABS data to reinforce calls for additional Day Care facilities and staff for the Italian-Australian community.*
2. *A similar strategy should be adopted in lobbying for additional funding as part of any submission process and in direct discussion with program managers at Commonwealth, state and local government levels.*
3. *Services at the regional and local level could be approached jointly by Co.As.It. and social groups representatives either on a one-to-one basis and/or by staging a forum to present the findings of this report to aged care workers, HACC service workers, HACC forums, community transport services etc.*
4. *The above points could be supported by a detailed strategic plan developed by Co.As.It.'s Community Services Team Leader and aged services workers.*
5. *There is a need to raise awareness of an ageing generation of Italians in the broader Italian community, with emphasis on the resource requirements with the view to generating sponsorship for specific aged services programs within the Italian community. This could be achieved through publicity in Italian media and through fund-raising events for specific aged care support benefits.*
6. *A detailed communications and sponsorship plan could be developed jointly by Co.As.It.'s aged services staff, the Community Services Sub-Committee and Marketing Officer.*

### *Timeframe:*

*Long-term*

*Long-term*

*Medium-term*

*Short-term*

*Long-term  
& ongoing*

*Short-term*

**Recommendations:**

7. *At the Community Services Sub-committee level, Co.As.It. could consider transitional arrangements for groups that are under threat by declining membership and enter in consultation with affected committees.*
8. *As a long-term strategy, Co.As.It. might consider the devolution and extension of cultural activities such as the Italian heritage program to larger groups in western, southern and northern Sydney. This could be trialed as a pilot project in forming localised Italian historical societies linked to an existing social group where member interest may be stronger. Potentially, this could be a rallying point for the involvement of members' offspring and younger members of the Italian-Australian community.*
9. *The project could be guided by Co.As.It. and potentially, involve the development of cross-generational projects funded by local councils, and arts funding bodies. Co.As.It. could investigate the availability of funding and prospective projects.*
10. *Co.As.It. should review the shared constitution of groups in regards to the role and period served by committee with the view to limiting the period served by office bearers or possible rotation of positions. The review might also consider the role that may be played by past presidents in honorary positions.*
11. *Leaders Day should continue to be promoted to committees along with key aspects of effectively managing a community organisation.*
12. *Co.As.It. staff could conduct information presentations as part of their visits to groups to familiarise members with the organisation's history, role and range of services.*
13. *Social groups would benefit from a presentation of this report's findings in a summarised and translated format – perhaps during visits by Co.As.It. aged workers.*

**Timeframe:**

*Medium-term*

*Long-term*

*Long-term*

*Long-Term*

*Medium-term & ongoing*

*Short-Term & ongoing*

*Short-term*

**Recommendations:**

14. *Social groups may benefit from the development of a directory of health, aged care and related support services as a regional level, with service descriptions in Italian. Directories could be based on information supplied in council community directories, or even jointly funded by councils and Co.As.It. as a project.*
15. *Presentations by speakers from local services could be jointly initiated by Co.As.It. and group committees after topic preferences are discussed and prioritised with members.*
16. *Where social groups are denied access to services and community resources, members should assert their right to equal use of such resources through complaints processes, and where necessary, to elected officials of councils and to service administrators.*

**Timeframe:**

*Short to  
medium  
term*

*Short-term  
& ongoing*

*Short-Term  
& ongoing*