



OM:NI

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Evaluation of the Older Men: New Ideas (OM:NI) Program

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I. Introduction

In 2021, La Trobe University was contracted by COTA Victoria to conduct an evaluation of the Older Men: New Ideas (OM:NI) program. OM:NI is a COTA Victoria run program that is open to all Victorian men aged over 50 years, and the primary purpose of the program is to support older men's mental health through small, informal community-based peer-support groups. Groups targeting older men's health, wellbeing and social needs are critical in addressing some of the health and social challenges that older men face, including increasing risk of social isolation, exclusion and loneliness, lower use of health and mental health services, reduced help-seeking behaviour and growing incidences of depression and mental health issues (1-4)

However, there is a significant lack of evidence in relation to best practice for men's group interventions (2, 5), which limits the capacity of existing men's groups to implement and refine their activities to respond to men's needs. Moreover, there has not been an independent review or evaluation of the OM:NI program in recent years, and COTA Victoria has identified a critical need to build an evidence base to make informed decisions about the long-term sustainability of the program, inclusive of factors relating to

the value proposition for OM:NI participants, service delivery, governance, marketing, business development (including fundraising), and other operational matters.

Consequently, this report details the findings from an independent review and evaluation of the OM:NI program, with the dual aims of:

- Understanding strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with program sustainability
- Providing targeted evidence to support informed decision-making and planning associated with program sustainability.

This report is set out in seven sections. First, a brief background of the OM:NI program, and the characteristics of the Victorian OM:NI groups, is presented (Section 2), and a review of the international literature on best-practice engagement of older men in group activities or interventions (Section 3) is outlined. The methods for the empirical evaluation are presented in Section 4, with the evaluation findings presented in Sections 5 and 6. Critical discussion of these findings, and the implications for program sustainability, are outlined in Section 7.

2. OM:NI background

2.1 OM:NI objective and values

OM:NI men's discussion groups are promoted by COTA Victoria as *'a place for older men to meet other older men for mateship, friendship and belonging'*, with the aim of sharing experience and wisdom, and talking about their lives in a non-judgmental environment. When OM:NI was first launched in Victoria, its aim was *'to enhance the health and wellbeing of older men'* (6). OM:NI is targeted at men aged 50 years and older who are approaching retirement or who have entered retirement, with OM:NI built on a philosophy of filling the void left in a man's social life that used to be filled by working. However, OM:NI may also be defined by what it is not, as the starter kit states, *'OM:NI is not all things for all men... It is not a therapy group, nor is it a medical or mental support group'* (7). Key values associated with OM:NI men's discussion groups, as highlighted in the OM:NI manual (8), include:

- The ability to talk, listen, discuss, and share experiences, without gossiping or discussing the lives of other participants in the group
- Accepting others, supporting one another, suspending judgement and criticism, and being respectful
- Expressing positivity and laughing together
- Demonstrating trust and confidentiality within the group environment
- Having choice and control over level of participation in discussions



2.2 Origins of OM:NI in NSW and Victoria

OM:NI was launched in Sydney on 19 October 1999, under the auspices of COTA NSW. Jack Zinn, who acted as the first project officer, is acknowledged as the creator of OM:NI. From 2002-2004, members of COTA NSW liaised with members of COTA Victoria in relation to the establishment of OM:NI groups in Victoria. OM:NI was launched in Victoria on 17 March 2004, with funding of \$46,000 per annum by Balwyn Rotary Club provided to COTA Victoria to support a part time project officer (David Clunn) to begin to establish Victorian groups. The first official Victorian OM:NI group was established in Stonnington/Prahran later that year (6).

Between 2004-2006, twelve OM:NI groups were established across various suburbs in Melbourne and regional Victoria. In 2006, additional funds were provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs to assist with the planned establishment of two OM:NI groups in RSLs. However, in that same year, Balwyn Rotary Club withdrew their funding support and the COTA Victoria project officer resigned. To address this staffing shortfall, COTA Victoria introduced quarterly meetings of representatives from OM:NI groups and developed the OM:NI Advisory Group (OAG) in 2007. The OAG, in collaboration with COTA Victoria, developed an OM:NI Information and Resource Manual to outline operational issues, in the absence of an OM:NI coordinator (6). From 2007-2011, ten more groups were established (22 in total). Over time, some OM:NI groups have ceased operations, and some have moved away from the OM:NI model to become activities groups auspiced by local councils (6). In 2018, 24 OM:NI groups were in existence (6), with this figure standing at 28 in 2021.



2.3 Current structure and governance of OM:NI

OM:NI operates largely through volunteer labour and self-funding by OM:NI participants. Limited oversight, insurance, and support of the program is provided by COTA Victoria. Governance for OM:NI is provided by the OM:NI Advisory Committee (OAC), who meet at four times per annum. Members of the OAC are appointed by COTA Victoria. The purpose of the OAC is to *'provide strategic advice on the organisations' OM:NI strategy, maintenance and development in Victoria, facilitate the use of the OM:NI program to enhance the lives of older men, [and] facilitate effective communication between COTA Victoria, the Board and OM:NI groups'* (9).

Each OM:NI group operates autonomously, but follows a similar structure and process:

- Within each group, at least one man elects to become a COTA Victoria Contact. This man must register as a COTA Victoria volunteer, and he is then covered by COTA Victoria insurance while engaged in approved OM:NI activities. The COTA Victoria Contact volunteer from each group is obliged to participate in four meetings per annum, of representatives from all groups.
- Groups are facilitated by a group member who is assigned the role of Group Facilitator. The Group Facilitator's role is to *'keep the meeting on track and ensure agreed guidelines are adhered to'* (7). The Group Facilitator also has responsibility to manage time during the meeting and ensure that every group member has opportunity to speak, listen, and *'be given a fair go'* (7). The Group Facilitator role can be rotated among the group members, and in fact, *'all OM:NI men [are] encouraged to have a go at facilitating an OM:NI meeting and gain an understanding of the role'* (8). Although men are given the choice to be Group Facilitator, they do not have to take the opportunity. Facilitation is shared so that the men understand what the role entails and therefore they have empathy to support the Group Facilitator. A deputy Group Facilitator is also encouraged, to provide support to the Group Facilitator and to step into the Group Facilitator role at an appointed time or if required.

Participants can join existing groups by calling or emailing COTA Victoria to find out if there is a group local to them, as advertised on the promotional flyer developed by COTA Victoria, and the COTA Victoria web page (<https://www.cotavic.org.au/our-programs/omni-mens-discussion-group/>). Currently, OM:NI groups develop organically, with two primary methods for commencing new groups:

1. Conducting an open public forum for a whole community, including women (who act as supporters / recruiters for OM:NI by encouraging the men in their lives to begin attending an OM:NI group. During the public forum, organisers obtain expressions of interest and announce meeting details for an inaugural meeting.

2. Conduct a 'Men Where Are You?' once-only discussion session. Potential OM:NI participants are directly invited to attend the discussion. At the conclusion of the discussion, a decision to proceed to an inaugural meeting is made.

The OM:NI Starter Kit (7) recommends that the ideal sized group is 6-12 men, *'although larger numbers can be managed if there is time to ensure everyone has an opportunity to contribute and get to know each other'*. The ideal venue for an OM:NI group is one that is a public venue, is free to use or has a low rental cost, has access to tea/coffee making facilities and toilet access. Participants pay a small fee to attend, which covers venue hire and refreshments. The OM:NI Manual (8) outlines a standard agenda for running discussion groups, which involves the following steps:

1. Welcome to everyone – Men who are new to the group or are returning after a long break are acknowledged; apologies are acknowledged.
2. Check-in – Each member shares what has been happening in his life, or some other significant issue since the last meeting. Each member is allocated 3-5mins to speak without interruption, including no comments or questions from others. If a man raises

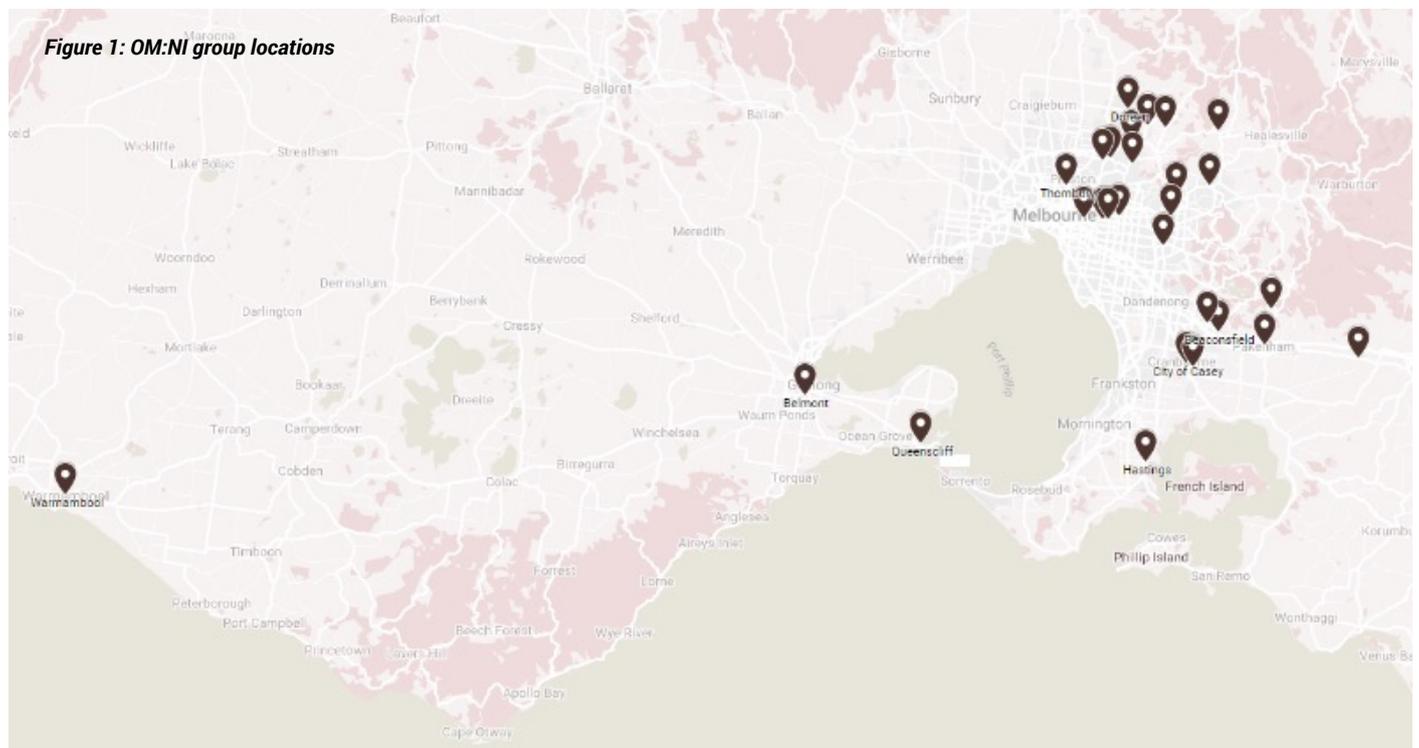
a particularly significant issue that requires more than 5mins, the group can choose to either allow that man more time to speak, or to allow extra time after others have completed their check-in.

3. Questions and comments that arise from the check-in are discussed.
4. Housekeeping issues such as points about meeting procedure, social events and activities, are discussed.
5. Tea/coffee break (10-20mins)
6. Topic Discussion – Each man has the opportunity to contribute his thoughts about the topic of the day.
7. Discussion and choosing of a topic for discussion at the next meeting.
8. Check-out – *'each member can have the opportunity to say how the meeting was for them. It may only be a few words'* (8).

The OM:NI Manual (8) lists 64 suggested diverse topics for discussion; however, groups are not limited to these suggested topics and each group is free to choose any mutually agreed upon topic for discussion.

2.4 Current OM:NI statistics

There are currently 28 OM:NI groups across Victoria. However, in 2021, only 17 groups had meetings, which is a potential consequence of the ongoing challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Most groups are located in Melbourne (see Figure 1).

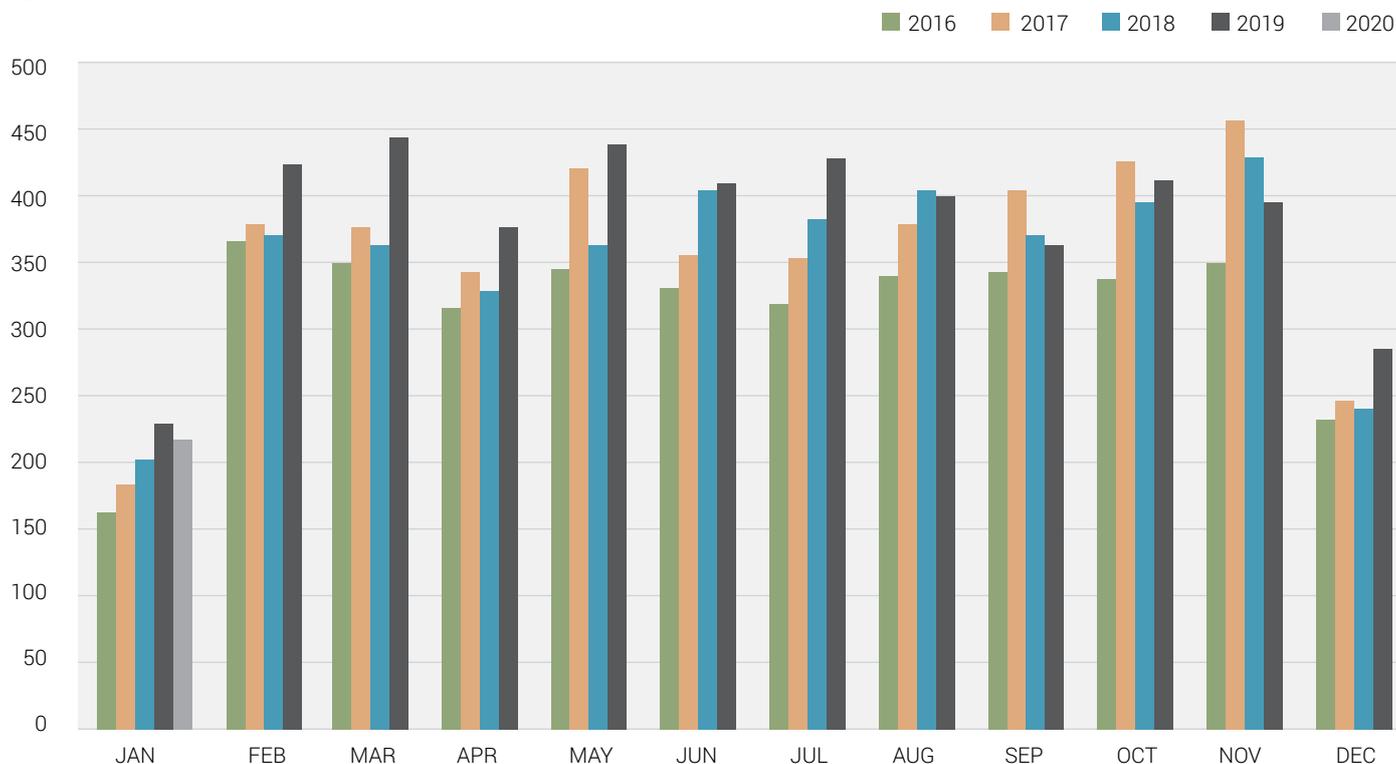


Attendance data demonstrates that 2019 was the year with the highest number of attendees and groups (see Table 1), with a 23% increase recorded from 2016. Attendance fell in 2020 and 2021, however this can be attributed to disruptions caused by COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Figure 2 depicts mean monthly attendances from 2016 until the start of the pandemic in 2020. This graph illustrates that regular attendance has increased since 2016.

Table 1. OM:NI group meeting attendance data, 2016-2021

| Year | Total no. attendees | Total no. group meetings | Average no. attendees per group meeting | Max no. attendees per group meeting | Min no. attendees per group meeting |
|------|---------------------|--------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 2021 | 452 | 52 | 8.7 | 14 | 4 |
| 2020 | 41 | 5 | 8.2 | 12 | 5 |
| 2019 | 1227 | 114 | 10.8 | 19 | 2 |
| 2018 | 1096 | 92 | 11.9 | 24 | 4 |
| 2017 | 1121 | 94 | 11.9 | 33 | 1 |
| 2016 | 994 | 87 | 11.4 | 30 | 3 |

Figure 2. OM:NI mean monthly attendances, 2016-2021



Moving into the future, the OAC has identified an agenda to seek growth in total number of attendees and numbers of groups in Victoria. In addition to supporting existing OM:NI groups, responsibilities of the OAC include assisting the COTA Victoria Board to 'grow OM:NI across Melbourne and Victoria' and to 'extend OM:NI into culturally diverse communities' (9).

3. Best practice mechanisms for engaging older men in group social activities: a desktop literature review

3.1 Background

This brief desktop review aims to identify best practice mechanisms for engaging older men (50+) in group social activities, with the aim of highlighting key findings that can inform the evaluation of OM:NI's activities. A desktop review was conducted in late 2021 (and reviewed in June 2022 to identify any updated literature), using the *Google Scholar* database (peer reviewed journal articles, books and book chapters and high-quality grey literature), to identify best practice mechanisms relating to recruitment and retention of older men in group activities.

Searches were conducted using a combination of the keywords outlined in Table 2, which were developed through an iterative process to identify keywords that would yield relevant literature. Searches were limited to a ten-year period to ensure that findings were relatively recent. Data relating to exercise groups were excluded, as they have a different focus and are often health-mandated, with the physical exercise component their key motivation for attendance, which is not a feature of this review.

Table 2: Keywords used

| | | |
|---------------|--------------|--|
| "Older men" | Motivation | "social participation" |
| "senior men" | Enablers | "social activit*" |
| "elderly men" | Facilitators | "group activit*" |
| | Engagement | "social groups"; "community groups" |
| | Recruitment | "activity groups"; "activity based groups" |
| | Retention | "activity engagement" |
| | | "group participation" |

Data relating to the key objectives of the desktop review (best practice mechanisms relating to recruitment and retention of older men in group activities) were extracted from the identified literature. The reference lists of relevant literature were also searched to identify additional seminal literature, which contributed data beyond that already identified in the review. Where possible, data was stratified by geographic population (e.g. urban/rural/regional) and specific characteristics of older men (e.g. younger-old men, Indigenous, culturally and linguistically diverse, LGBTIQ+ groups, older men living with disability or cognitive impairment). However, in many cases this was not possible due to the generic nature of the reported findings, which fail to identify the specific needs of these cohorts beyond broader older male populations.

3.2 Key findings

There is a relatively limited evidence base relating to best practice mechanisms for engaging men in group social activities and interventions, which can be potentially attributed to the globally acknowledged difficulties in getting older men to engage in group and social activities (2, 5). Findings discussed in this review are drawn from a diversity of countries (including Australia, Ireland, Canada, and the United Kingdom), and primarily relate to the following categories of groups:

- Social activities with a focus on voluntary work or service activities, such as Men's Sheds (1, 2, 10-31) and U3A (32).
- Activities with a purely social or recreational focus, such as coffee mornings (33), retirement groups, and community activities (34-37).

The majority of the literature evaluating or examining older men's participation in group activities is related to Men's Sheds, given their specific focus on men, and this is a significant limitation of this review. As other reviews and studies have noted, there is limited evidence relating to the acceptability, accessibility, and effectiveness of social interventions for older men from diverse cultural backgrounds, or with specific health conditions (22). While there is some work exploring the needs of specific cohorts of older men, including those from rural and regional backgrounds (10, 18, 29), LGBTIQ+ backgrounds (35, 36), Indigenous backgrounds (16), older men living with disability (20, 31), and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (13, 29), this is primarily anecdotal data taken from broader studies and not an in-depth investigation of the specific needs of these cohorts. There has also been little work conducted specifically on best practice mechanisms to engage older men in gendered interventions such as Men's Sheds (17, 22). Therefore, the findings from the empirical component of this research (which will be reported in subsequent sections of this report) will make a significant contribution to the evidence base relating to engagement of older men in social group activity.

3.2.1 Best practice factors relating to recruitment of older men to social groups

In recruiting men to participate in social groups, a series of factors have been identified through reviewing the literature, which are summarised in table 3. Here, recruitment of older men to social groups can be linked with the ability of groups to meet individual values and preferences for activity. These are primarily associated with socialisation with other men, and the provision of opportunities to reinforce male gender identities through continuity of activity and engagement in meaningful, purposeful activity. Characteristics of groups in terms of location and resourcing are also important, particularly in relation to situating them in a community

environment that is easily accessible. Recruitment strategies are also an important consideration in engaging men in group activities, with diversity of approaches and the use of personal relationships to recruit men identified as central within the literature. Development of promotional material that is attractive to older male populations, through use of humour, images and emphasis of the social rather than the health component, has also been identified as effective in engaging this cohort.

These findings also indicate that for particular groups of men (e.g., culturally and linguistically diverse, LGBTIQ+ populations, other vulnerable or at-risk populations of older men) there are particular benefits associated with providing opportunities for targeted socialisation and recruitment among these cohorts, which should be considered in developing social groups and recruitment strategies.

Table 3: Best practice factors relating to recruitment of older men to social groups

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>Ability of groups to meet individual values and preferences for activity</p> | <p>The perceived ability of the group to meet specific objectives, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socialisation with like-minded men (14, 15, 28, 29, 33, 38), but not necessarily just older men (10, 36) • Their ability to support maintenance of a sense of identity and purpose post retirement (1, 2, 22, 38), through enabling men to define/practice their masculinity in a male-friendly environment (1, 20, 22, 28, 29, 32, 37) • Targeted socialisation for specific groups of men, such as men from LGBTIQ+, culturally diverse, and Indigenous backgrounds, and men who are carers (16, 36), particularly in rural areas where these cohorts of men are less numerous (35) • Their ability to address loneliness (22, 38) • Their ability to provide meaningful (14, 15, 17) or purposeful occupation (22, 29) and develop a sense of accomplishment (38) • The ability to learn new things from other men in a supportive environment (2, 13-15, 20, 29) • Their ability to provide continuity in retirement through opportunity to maintain employment related skills and/or trades, links with long term interests, or provision of an all-male environment (10, 18, 29, 31, 38, 39) • The unique value proposition of the group, in that it is perceived as different to other offerings for older men (32) |
| <p>Suitable group location and resourcing</p> | <p>Groups that were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Located in the participant's immediate community (13) • Located in community neighbourhood environments that are attractive to males, not on hospital or health premises if possible (1, 10), • Accessible by public transport and with free/ample parking (10) • Hosted in high quality venues with adequate resources (18) • Low cost to participants (20, 29) |
| <p>Recruitment methods that are sensitive to older men's needs and preferences</p> | <p>Successful methods of recruitment for older males included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing men's group activities to female partners (10, 13) • Attendance promoted to men by friends and family (22, 38) • Use of a variety of recruitment methods, including public meetings canvassing interest, advertising (local newspapers, community notices, radio and television, word of mouth, letterbox drops, local hardware store barbeques, promotion at local agricultural shows, sporting clubs, and men's health and retirement activities/expos (10, 13, 32, 34) • Direct invitation to men by friendly/engaging group leaders, and subsequent follow up (13) • Referral from health, social welfare and aged care professionals and promotion through health care providers (1, 10, 13, 31, 39), particularly for at-risk and vulnerable groups (people who had lost jobs, experienced significant illness, or bereavement) • Promotion of men's groups before they retire/close to retirement, by engaging with workplaces (13) • Staff specifically dedicated to recruitment (34) |
| <p>Development and circulation of appropriate promotional material</p> | <p>Development of promotional material that is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appealing to males; including use of colourful graphics and humour, use of lay language, and avoiding large amounts of text (10, 13, 34). • Available in relevant languages for CALD populations (13). • Promotes an emphasis on community and friendship, and post-retirement lifestyles rather than purely occupational, educational, or health objectives (13, 17, 32, 34) |

3.2.2 Best practice factors relating to retention and ongoing engagement of older men in social groups

To retain and engage older men on an ongoing basis within social groups, a series of factors were identified, which are summarised in table 4. Some of these factors are similar to those that facilitated recruitment of men to the groups in the first place (e.g. their ability to facilitate social outcomes and to provide opportunities for participating in meaningful activity), so it can be construed that the ability of these groups to meet initial expectations plays a significant overarching role.

Administration and governance and format of group activities play a significant role in retaining and engaging older men. Although the presence of a skilled leader to support engagement of men in groups was important, this needs to occur in a largely unstructured, informal, and flexible environment to support the various capacities and preferences of older men. Diversity of activities and

outcomes was also significant; both social and occupational outcomes were important to the men who participated in these groups. Of particular importance is the need for older male participants to be active contributors in dictating the direction and format of the group, and to perceive that their participation is actively contributing to society in some way – either within the group itself through providing support to others, or externally to the community.

In considering retention and ongoing engagement, the ability of groups to sustain participation among groups at risk of social exclusion was also deemed important – from the perspective of providing venues that are supportive to particular groups of older men, and in ensuring that they are being mentored and supported within group environments. As the findings suggest, this may reflect not only provision of support, but potentially education and awareness raising in relation to diversity within group administrators and participants.

Table 4: Best practice factors relating to retention and ongoing engagement of older men in social groups

| | |
|--|---|
| Administration and governance factors | <p>Expertise of leaders that coordinate activities, who can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successfully facilitate men’s engagement and encourage learning, and sharing of skills and knowledge (2, 22, 24, 28, 34) • Ensure that groups are not dominated by one individual (34) • Provide clear group direction, but without a formal hierarchical structure of authority (8, 21) <p>Provision of strong community support for the men’s group (2)</p> |
| Format of groups | <p>Groups that were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small in size (15) • Unstructured and informal in terms of format (2, 14, 16, 18) • Flexible in relation to attendance and program structure – men can contribute as much or as little as they like without pressure to perform (1, 15, 20, 29, 38) • Able to accommodate a diversity of interests (10, 27), and facilitate both occupational and social outcomes (15, 20). |
| Ability of group activities to support ‘male’ interests | <p>Provision of activities that reinforce masculinity among group members (20, 22).</p> |
| Ability to provide opportunities for older men to be active contributors to the group and broader society | <p>Ability of the group to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide benefits to the wider community (22, 37, 39); • Be participant led, where men can contribute to the running of the activity and further develop the direction of the group (11, 15, 16, 18, 38), • Provide opportunities for older men to help others by means of mentoring and their contributions – rather than being ‘clients’ or ‘recipients’ of a service (10, 14, 16, 18, 20, 38) |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Ability of the group to facilitate social connection and support among its members</p> | <p>Provision of opportunities for men to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in an occupational activity as a catalyst for social interaction (1) • Actively participate in shaping the group, and developing a sense of belonging and connection by doing so (15, 20, 33, 36, 37) • Develop and nurture friendships with like-minded men with common interests (10, 13-15, 18, 20, 39) • Meet other men who they might not necessarily associate with (18, 34) • Provision of socialisation opportunities (10, 20), such as group outings (28) • Provide/receive support from other men in a non-judgmental, relaxed environment (10) • Ability for men to share stories about themselves (14) <p>Group proximity to, and relationships with other community groups or organisations that facilitate additional social interactions, such as through shared spaces (20)</p> |
| <p>Ability of groups to support engagement of vulnerable male populations</p> | <p>Ability of groups to provide:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical spaces to support active participation by people living with disability (20) • Mentoring and specific support for new members, particularly at-risk groups for social exclusion (older men who are unemployed/ have a lack of self-esteem or low confidence, older LGBTIQ+ men, older men living with disability and cognitive impairment), including specific welcoming activities, mentoring and one on one support, a buddy system and follow up of absent members (1, 10, 13) • Placement of culturally and linguistically diverse people with others of a similar cultural background/language (where they desire this) (29) • Training of group members and leaders on the needs of people living with disability and/or cognitive impairment (1, 31) |

Consequently, although the evidence base in relation to best-practice recruitment and retention of older men in social groups is relatively limited (particularly in relation to sub-groups of older men), these findings highlight a series of key considerations relating to how social groups targeting older men can be sustained, which can be considered against the empirical findings included in this report in formulating potential strategies or directions for OM:NI. These include:

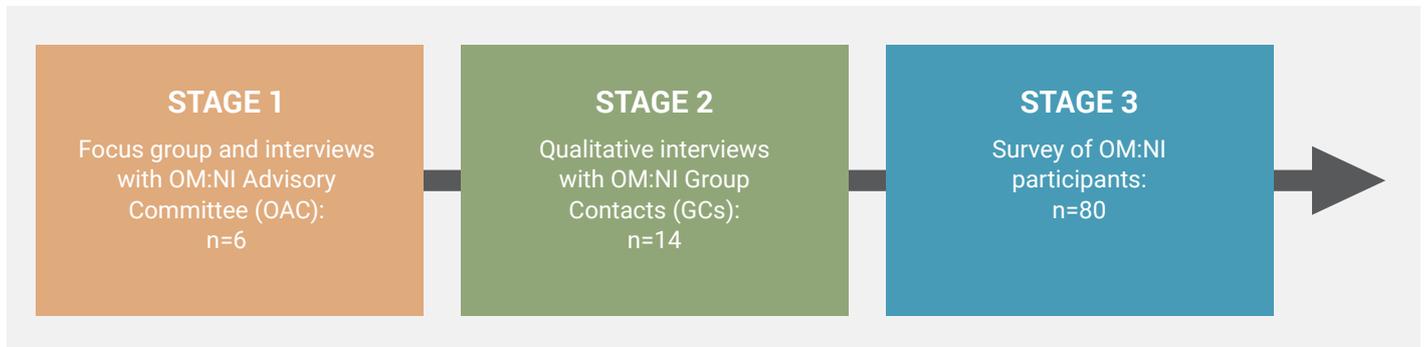
- Motivations of older men to engage in group activities; in terms of what they hope to achieve from engagement and the balance between social and activity-based objectives
- Specific strategies for recruitment of older males, including methods of engagement, composition of men's groups and development of promotional material
- Specific strategies for retaining older men within group activities, particularly in relation to group format, governance and social objectives, and how groups of older men at risk of social exclusion can be retained within group activity.



4 Evaluation methods

The formal evaluation component employed a multiple methods research design, which was sequential and conducted in three stages (see Figure 3). Ethical approval for the evaluation was provided by La Trobe University's human ethics committee (HEC21367).

Figure 3. Sequential stages of the study



4.1 Recruitment and data collection

4.1.1 Stage 1: Focus group and interviews with OM:NI Advisory Committee (n=6)

Members of the OM:NI Advisory Committee (OAC) were invited to participate in an online focus group (using Zoom videoconferencing), which was conducted by two members of the La Trobe University research team in November 2021. Four OAC members participated in the focus group, and two other OAC members who could not attend the focus group meeting were individually interviewed using the same questions and format utilised for the focus group. Focus groups and interviews were structured in accordance with the following key themes:

- A summary of the OM:NI program, including the key objectives, governance processes, marketing, characteristics of men who attend and group activities
- Things that are currently working well in the OM:NI program (strengths)
- Things that need attention, or are not working well (weaknesses)
- Things OM:NI could take advantage of to improve the program (opportunities)
- Things that will threaten the sustainability of the program moving into the future, and how these threats could be addressed (threats)

The focus group and interviews were audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim.

4.1.2 Stage 2: Interviews with Group Contacts (n=14)

In February 2022, group contacts (GCs) were invited to participate in an individual semi-structured interview with a member of the La Trobe University research team, which was conducted either by telephone or using videoconferencing technology according to the preference of the participant. Invitations to participate were forwarded to existing group contacts by email by the OAC Chairperson, with interested GCs invited to contact the La Trobe University research team directly to register their interest. Interviews addressed similar themes as discussed in the Stage 1 focus group and interviews, and included:

- Characteristics of their OM:NI group
- Things that were currently working well within their OM:NI group, in terms of recruiting and retaining men (strengths)
- Things that need attention, or are not working well (weaknesses)
- Things that could be done to recruit new men, and keep existing men involved (opportunities)
- Things that will threaten the sustainability of their group in the future, and how they think some of these threats could be addressed (threats)
- Impacts of COVID-19 on their OM:NI group

The interviews were audio-recorded with participant permission and transcribed verbatim.

4.1.3 Stage 3: Survey of OM:NI participants (n=80)

Between February – May 2022, current and lapsed OM:NI participants were invited to take part in a cross-sectional survey, which could be completed online (using QuestionPro) or in hard copy. Participants were forwarded information on the survey by their respective GCs, who distributed the survey link and hard copies of the survey to their group participants. Participants also had the option to contact the La Trobe University research team directly to receive a hard copy of the survey. Participants who completed a survey were given the opportunity to enter a draw to win a \$50 Coles Myer gift card.

Survey questions included the following, and incorporated some adapted questions from evaluative studies examining the strengths and weaknesses of gendered interventions (29):

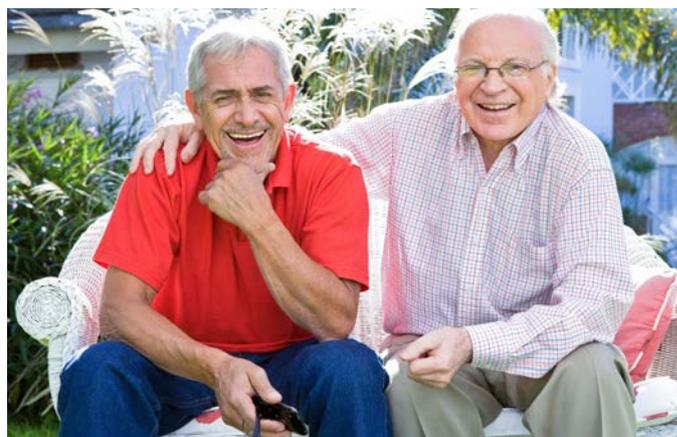
- Demographic characteristics (age, country of birth and language spoken at home, level of education, employment status, relationship status, profession of employment)
- Current level of engagement with OM:NI (status of participation, group attended, length of engagement, how they found out about OM:NI, why they became involved, primary motivation for attending OM:NI)
- Feelings about their participation in OM:NI
- Perspectives on how they felt their OM:NI group could improve
- Level of satisfaction with various aspects of their OM:NI group
- Impacts of COVID-19 on their engagement with their OM:NI group
- Motivations for future attendance
- Perspectives on future attendance

80 surveys were returned; with 66% completed online and 34% completed in hard-copy format.

4.2 Data analysis

Transcripts of the focus group and interviews were checked against the audio recordings for accuracy, de-identified and assigned a code. They were then imported into a qualitative data analysis program (QSR-NVivo). Transcripts were inductively coded using the structure of the interview schedules as a broad framework; which encompassed: 1. Background descriptions of OM:NI; 2. Strengths; 3. Weaknesses; 4. Opportunities; 5. Threats; 6. Other Issues. Further iterative analysis, sorting, categorisation, and refining of categories was completed to produce preliminary themes. These themes were discussed by the La Trobe researchers and presented to the project advisory team on two occasions. Further iterative analysis and refining of themes was completed through discussion between the La Trobe researchers and qualitative writing as this study report was prepared.

For the survey data, a La Trobe University research officer entered the completed hard-copy surveys into QuestionPro. Survey data were then double-checked and cleaned within QuestionPro. Quantitative questions were analysed to produce a descriptive statistical report of question responses, and qualitative questions were analysed thematically to provide a descriptive analysis.



5 OM:NI Advisory Committee and Group Contact Perspectives

This section presents the data from the focus group and semi-structured interviews with OM:NI advisory committee (OAC) members and group contacts (GCs). This is presented in four sections – strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats – with specific distinction made between factors associated with the auspicing organisation (COTA Victoria) and the OM:NI program itself.

5.1 Strengths: What is working well in OM:NI?

5.1.1 The OM:NI group structure is appropriate, flexible, and adaptable

Each OM:NI group has its own unique constitution, and yet each group is recognisably an OM:NI group. There is a unifying structure to all groups that defines it as an OM:NI group and distinctive from other sorts of men's group. Yet each group has its own local flavour, with one participant stating, *"Ours works well the way it does. Others say that they prefer to have the rigid format with a topic, and no doubt they run quite well too"* (GC01). Local groups differ according to group size, timing of group meetings, governance structure (including facilitation, group contact role, and other roles), fees payable, relationship with local community, type and support of meeting venue, and nuances of meeting structure.

That's where the total freedom cuts in. The degree of performing to the overall plan. The COTA manual, it lays out a format that can be followed but also can be varied to suit the majority. So you either conform partly or along the way completely as some do. The format is pretty much saying g'day, welcome everyone and then the facilitator will go around the room and ask each of the people to present if they want to, with preference to what they've done in the past fortnight or month since last meeting. Have a coffee, [be]cause that takes quite a while you go round the room for 10 or 12 fellas. We have a coffee then followed by a more formal discussion about a pre-selected subject. (OACFG)

Each group operates broadly within the OM:NI recommended group structure framework however the groups modify the requirements to best suit the local group. *"We are fairly formulaic in the way it's designed but ... it's a successful formula ... it brings everyone down to a common ground with expectations about how the meeting is going to run. It actually doesn't even feel like a meeting, it's just a little bit of structure to a gathering and we work within that framework"* (GC04).

5.1.2 The OM:NI structure enables autonomy and egalitarianism

The flexibility of the OM:NI structure is important because the men want to have autonomy to make the group suit them on a meeting-by-meeting basis. *"Let a hundred flowers bloom... I think it would be a pity if we imposed a model that it has to be X. Part of the attraction is that ... it's a relatively free forum, within some guidelines"* (GC12). If the structure was too rigid, or rigidly enforced, it would be a deterrent to the men.

OMNI, I think want to have rules, sort of like a scheduled meeting ... I never did that. I felt if they [OM:NI men] were happy talking about whatever they're talking about, it's time well spent. This is, I think, this is one of the reasons why they come back. It's not regulated, and they can join in any time they want to ... everything is relaxed, and everybody can join in at any time they feel like it ... We are all 80-year old's who have been there and done that, we don't want to be controlled anymore. (GC01)

The men enjoy deciding for themselves how their group will run. *"They come along because it's casual, you're not told what you have to do, you just, it's just a comfortable meeting activity that everybody can happily attend"* (GC01).

Egalitarianism is a prized OM:NI philosophical idea: *"We are all equal. We are all even... With certain restrictions, we can virtually do our own thing and enjoy it very, very naturally"* (GC07). *"I became a member of this group because of the simplicity of it. There's no presidents. There's no secretaries. There's no treasurers. There's no minutes. It's just a social gathering. That's what it is"* (GC11).

5.1.3 OM:NI values and structure: meeting a niche need

As one participant succinctly stated, OM:NI is distinct from other groups, describing, *"It sort of has a bit of a niche for those men who perhaps don't fit into other kinds of programs, like the Men's Sheds or other kinds of service clubs. OM:NI does seem to offer something that's a little bit different from some of those other groups that are available"* (OACFG). OM:NI has a clear focus: it's a men's only discussion group, and OM:NI groups follow a consistent structure, even though there may be minor variations between groups. According to the participants, the other feature that differentiates OM:NI from other types of men's groups is its key values about how groups should be conducted and how the men ought to relate to each other:

Well, the key to OM:NI is its guidelines, and the guidelines are very simple. I think of them as CAR ... Confidentiality. You don't get that with a Men's Shed. You get gossip and politics and egos. You don't get them so much at OM:NI because A stands for Acceptance. We accept what you say. We don't necessarily agree with what you say but we accept the right for you to have that opinion ... What's R? Respect. There's two forms of respect. We respect your right to have that opinion. Whilst you're speaking nobody else speaks. (GC09)

The structure of OM:NI groups and the principles that the OM:NI men follow create an environment in which the older men feel comfortable to talk about issues that they are not willing to discuss in other settings.

Some men have health issues that are quite serious which means that they need to leave the house and actually discuss those things amongst other men, who may or may not have insight into their particular medical concerns. So, it's an opportunity to just speak about that as opposed to say just speaking to their own family about it.... So, people would say things that they wouldn't ordinarily say, for example, to their own family or to their friends. (GC04)

The participants considered that OM:NI provides a safe space for older men to talk about a range of issues:

For the first three meetings he (OM:NI participant) said nothing or almost nothing. By the fourth meeting, suddenly it just happened. It came out. [The OM:NI participant told a deeply personal story] ... For 15 minutes it just all came out. The other men and I just sat there listening with empathy and respect.... Thereafter at the discussion groups, he participated. That's when I realised these principles work. But he needed time to accept, to realise that confidentiality meant what it said [and] that respect meant that. Not interrupting others but listening to them with empathy ... and therefore it was safe for him to share stuff that was deep inside him. I don't know whether he'd ever said that to his [family]. But he said it to us. That's an example of an OM:NI group working at its best. I'm not saying every man ... is going to do it. But there's an extreme example of how good an OM:NI group can be. A man who is a Men's Shed member and after a few minutes he said, "I am absolutely blown away. I've been a Men's Shed member for umpteen years, and we never have discussions like this. We never go deep. You can never really say what you mean to other men in the Men's Shed, but here I can." So, what I'm saying, I suppose, is I think OM:NI has got terrific principles and if it's practiced correctly, it will achieve some wonderful things. (GC02)

He said that he had to have [treatment for a medical condition]. That's pretty sensitive. Well for a lot of men it's very sensitive. I was amazed because I haven't been there yet, but three other people said, oh yeah, I've had that. It sort of broke the ice but also this guy was talking about how he was feeling about that. He had other people to say yeah, yeah. You'll get over it. It will be all right. So, it was a really - it doesn't happen every meeting but occasionally that sort of extra bit of I suppose what I'd call intimate support happens. We don't force it. It just happens and that's what so good. (GC12)

5.1.4 Male only discussion

The participants considered that the dimension of having only men in an OM:NI group facilitated the men to feel safer, to find it easier to form relationships with each other, and to speak openly with the other men.

Very soon and very quickly each individual, no matter how shy or private they might be ... in male company they seem to relax much more quickly. They develop a total freedom of expression that is quite amazing. I don't mean that in a smarty sense. It's actually, you see it happening, and it's very gratifying and it's really motivating. Because it's obvious that they're confident in being able to express themselves and take an interest in everybody else's opinions and values. You can see the positive influence it has on them. (GC07)

Through conversations with other men, OM:NI participants can feel more empowered, more connected and supported by other men, and enjoy the company and camaraderie of male kinship. "It's a group there for men to talk about things, what's going on. We [change] the whole world's philosophy for an hour. At 12 o'clock, when we all go, the world reverts back to the problems they had before. [Laughs]" (GC05).

When they talk about what has lifted them and what exciting things I've done in the last month it actually livens up the meeting and puts smiles on people's faces and a few laugh. And to me, the more laughing and more smiling is all we want, and they all agree that's why we go there. They go to smile with other men and of course well they will crack a joke, oh I'm away from the wife. Oh yeah, I can have my own time, you know, they'll all start laughing and carrying on like men do. And then they'll say this is a meeting for secret men's business. It's not, but the men feel important, and they laugh and carry on like silly teenagers to tell you the truth... it doesn't take much, believe it or not. Old men laugh more easily than teenagers, they really do. (GC06)

5.1.5 OM:NI cultivates friendships

The participants highly valued the friendships they made by attending OM:NI groups. These friendships are a powerful motivator for OM:NI participants to continue attending OM:NI. *"There is an affinity amongst the group if that's the right word... They are bonded. Joe [pseudonym] rang most of the guys [after COVID-19 restrictions eased] and said we're about to start meeting in the hall again ... They said 'yep, we'll be there', and they were"* (GC11).

As people get older, their worlds can start to shrink as they retire from work, and as death claims friends and family members. *"When you retire, what are you going to do? How are you going to do it? You've lost the contact with all of the people you've had before and you're in a different environment"* (GC05). OM:NI provides a path for older men to maintain or reclaim social connection and friendship in the face of losses: *"There's a couple of blokes there you can barely lever them out of the room. Everyone has gone and even then, half an hour [later] you might find them still talking in the car park ... That's what it's all about; making friends and learning how to make friends, how to be friendly and fill the gaps that occur as you lose wives"* (GC09). As one OAC member related,

I think a lot of men lose their male bonding arrangements once they marry. Their wife becomes the critical factor. They move into that family-oriented zone and then their only real social network is their work. Once they leave work, they've lost all social connection and ... they're typically the type of people who need the OM:NI framework to get connected again with that male social group that they really do need. Otherwise, they're very lonely. There's not a lot of help out there for them.... A lot of them struggle, they really do. (OACFG)

5.1.6 OM:NI provides an opportunity to give and receive support

As one group contact stated, *"I think the men realise that we're there to be mates and mates look after one another"* (GC14). As discussed in the previous section, the men provide each other with emotional support, and they also give and receive practical support, frequently and occasionally: Some *"men now cannot drive themselves.... we sometimes pick them up, or if they've got wives, they usually bring them. But we always take them home, so the wives don't have two trips from wherever they've come from.... It's looking after one another"* (GC02).

For some men, OM:NI friends provide the only support that an older man has in his life.

We actually rely on each other in certain bad stages of life... This is particularly prevalent in men ... Later in life their wife gets very sick ... The guy was beside himself ... Absolutely beside himself. And then basically he couldn't look after himself ... He fell apart. He used to phone up [and] a few of us would go around and help him... And he wouldn't have anyone without OM:NI. (GC06)

5.1.7 OM:NI creates connections, reduces isolation

Not all men find it easy to make social connections. OM:NI can help facilitate social relationships, as illustrated by a conversation that GC03 had with an OM:NI participant who said to him: *"this has been the greatest thing that's ever happened to me because I've always been a person who's ever been fairly shy, certainly introverted, and I've come along to ... this meeting.... This is the highlight of my month. I just look forward to it."* Many of the OM:NI groups get together as a group outside of the regular OM:NI meetings. These additional gatherings are for purely social reasons. *"[We] meet on a regular but not overly committed basis. Most groups would probably meet twice a month. They might have what regulars call a normal meeting and perhaps on one other occasion they might just go to a café. So being in contact is pretty important. And I think that's been a successful recipe"* (OACFG). An added side benefit to providing additional social opportunities for the older men is that the social occasions help to cement the friendships that form during the regular OM:NI meetings.

I don't think that group would still be going if we hadn't gone out together and had lunch and coffees... I think it ties people together because then they realise they're not just OM:NI participants, they're actually making friendships and it's a type of mateship, instead of just participating in going to talk... I think we all get along very well together and we'll probably be friends for life. (GC06)

5.1.8 Willingness of OM:NI participants to provide leadership

Having multiple group facilitators was considered a strength: *"We've got nine guys, facilitators, in our group. That's one of our strengths I believe"* (GC08). *"There was three or four of us, and we decided that we'd rotate the facilitation duties of the group, and that worked well because the rest of the blokes saw different styles and us as facilitators saw us as a different style amongst each other too. We learned a lot"* (GC11). When COVID-19 impacted groups and prevented the face-to-face OM:NI meetings from happening, group leaders stepped up to keep in contact with group participants. *"I keep in touch with all the chaps mostly by email or I ring up and talk to the odd one who are not [contactable by email]"* (GC14). As another group contact related,

We didn't meet for about seven months, and we had two meetings and the doors were shut again, so we didn't meet again for another six or seven months. But we kept in contact with each other by phone. I know some blokes ... would pick up the phone and ring Joe Blow ... and just have a chat. (GC11)

GC08 even went to the effort of sending letters to group participants who did not use email: *"I send them a letter of what was happening at the past meeting or couple of meetings and what the future couple of meetings will hold for them. That's probably my responsibility, keep them all up to date with information."* In some groups, participants stepped up to take on extra duties. In GC06's group, one member *"compiled a birthday list and an anniversary list."* As another group contact described,

One of the best things that we do, we have a welfare officer ... We've had several deaths in our organisation and ... [our welfare officer] he's excellent in the job. He keeps in contact with all the members if they're crook or have a problem. He talks to them and heals the problem or tries to heal the problem. I think it's excellent that we've got him... At our age, we need it. ... It's all personal. It's between him and them, yeah. But if they're crook or need somebody to ring them just to say hello, he does that. (GC05)

5.1.9 Support from venues

Many of the various organisations that provide venues for OM:NI group meetings are very supportive of the OM:NI men and they assist the groups in a variety of ways. For example, the venue for GC01's group "put out a brochure every 12 months describing what we do" and then the venue collects the names and contact details of people who express interest in learning more and pass the list along to GC01. The venues for GC02 and GC03's groups are supportive by not charging the OM:NI groups any fees to use the venue. "That's a real bonus because you don't want guys shelling out a lot of money to be able to cover the hire of a venue because venue hire, it's a little expensive" (GC03). The venue for GC05's group provides similar generous practical support: "We get free tea and coffee ... [and] they've arranged to hire the bus for us, the local council bus. We go on outings in the bus" (GC05).

5.2 Strengths: What is working well with COTA Victoria?

5.2.1 Provision of infrastructure and public liability insurance

The OACFG considered that COTA Victoria provides OM:NI with valuable infrastructure support:

The model works quite well as long as it can get the support from infrastructure that's already in existence essentially. So, I think given COTA's overall objective of looking after aged people in the community, then it works as a model operating off COTA as an individual arm of COTA from that point of view, to give it the infrastructure that it needs to perform its role. (OACFG)



The OACFG also noted that COTA Victoria management staff provide management and mediation support and assistance to OAC members:

[The OAC] were addressing an issue with a particular individual in one of the groups and [COTA Victoria staff member] had been engaged ... to get involved in that process to have discussions to help one of the members of the OAC... I see that as a support... at the highest level of the management group, you have a direct telephone conversation dealing with a particularly difficult individual in one of the groups. (OACFG)

The benefit is that [COTA Victoria] will provide public liability insurance ... [in some venues] without a certificate of currency from COTA you've got to furnish that before you can operate in their building. ... So that's a big plus that we get free of charge from COTA (OACFG).

GC09 had insight into OM:NI operating in New South Wales, and considered that OM:NI in Victoria operates more smoothly because COTA Victoria provides public liability insurance through volunteers registered with COTA Victoria:

We've been very lucky to have COTA auspicing us because we don't have a problem with public liability insurance. That was the problem in New South Wales. Nobody wanted to pay public liability insurance within the groups themselves, COTA New South Wales didn't want to pay for it and so on. So anyway, that created a mess that caused division up there (GC09)

Although the provision of public liability insurance by COTA Victoria through volunteer registration was cited to be a strength of OM:NI's association with COTA Victoria, there was also confusion. One group contact described the situation as "a totally uncertain public liability insurance problem. This has been going on for years. It's come up at meetings and somebody said this is the answer. It's not the answer. I don't know where it's going to go" (GC02). Another group contact thought that "this day in age you really need public liability for [all] your members" (GC14). Concern was also expressed by group contacts about cover for OM:NI groups in which no-one was registered as a COTA Victoria volunteer, and what the coverage was for a group meeting if the registered COTA Victoria volunteer was not in attendance at that particular meeting.

5.2.2 Direct access to COTA Victoria Board and Senior Management

The OAC have direct access to the COTA Victoria Board because one of the COTA Victoria Board members is also a member of the OAC. One of the senior managers at COTA Victoria also regularly attends OAC meetings, and the COTA Victoria Chief Executive Officer attends OAC meetings occasionally. The OAC is noted to have "a stronger voice now than they've ever had previously in relation to what OM:NI is doing and where it's going, going forward" (OACFG). "We coordinate a lot of the policies that'll help to get the policies going that come from COTA and we work with COTA closely, and the Board ... I think all that's working really well. There's a lot of support there" (OACFG).

5.3 Weaknesses: What needs improving in OM:NI?

5.3.1 Communication

That OACFG reported that “communication generally” needed to be improved. OAC members considered that recent improvements had been made to the flow of communication:

There's been a major step taken by the OAC by allocating different groups to one of the members of the OAC committee. That to my mind is a major step forward whereby there's a better flow of communication in both directions. We haven't heard very much from the groups in the past, now we're getting a bit more... I went to one group meeting as a guest ... and the facilitator contact person said, 'well this is a bit of an anomaly, I've been on the job for 6 or 7 years, we've never had anyone here from the OAC committee'. So, he was delighted that I'd taken the trouble to come. (OACFG)

GC11 considered that there was a communication breakdown between COTA Victoria, the OAC, and OM:NI participants: “every time somebody wants to talk to a men's group, they do, and rightly so, but you've got four, five, or six people at COTA talking to OMNI groups about different aspects and the left hand doesn't know what the bloody right hand is doing.” There did appear to be confusion and lack of clarity about role definitions, OM:NI policies, and resources available to support group contacts. Some group contacts considered that the role of group contact also included being the group facilitator. Other group contacts thought it was COTA Victoria policy that each OM:NI group could have only one facilitator / group contact. Some men were aware of the OM:NI manual, whereas others were not. Additionally, not all group contacts were able to attend the representatives' meetings. One group contact expressed that the minutes did not provide him with all the information he felt he needed and wanted, suggesting, “They do have minutes but they're very short minutes, they're very basic minutes. I don't know. It doesn't seem too much information coming and going” (GC06).

Group contacts expressed the desire for information and ideas to flow more freely to and from COTA Victoria, the OAC, and groups (via group contacts). As one group contact suggested, “We don't have much to do directly with COTA. ... Not much information gets handed down, not directly anyway... we don't get much information formally at all” (GC01). They wanted to be consulted more frequently about ideas and issues affecting OM:NI. They also wanted time to discuss issues with the other group participants and then pass this information back through the OAC to COTA Victoria.

5.3.2 More listening required

Several group contacts cited examples of observing or feeling that their ideas for expansion or improvement of OM:NI were unwelcomed. GC06 said one of the participants in his group tried to express an idea for expansion of OM:NI to the OAC “and he was told 'I don't want to hear it. I don't want to hear it.' They're the words he was told back. And all he was trying to do was trying to help the growth of OM:NI and help”. The group contacts are highly sensitised to the OM:NI principles, one of which is the principle of respect that is demonstrated through allowing everyone to speak freely about the issue under discussion and to hold and express his own opinion even if others disagree with his opinion. GC08 felt that there were times when the OM:NI principles were disregarded and the man responsible for leading the group did not provide adequate leadership about the issue:

Well, I think there's a natural drift away from the guidelines ... For example, I mentioned something that I thought was important and another bloke came back and said, 'that's not important', sort of thing. Now, that's wrong. But how to address that and to keep people being honest is a bit of a balancing thing. (GC08)

One participant felt that his opinion was disregarded at a representatives' meeting: “at the meeting ... I sort of - virtually I wasn't allowed to put my view in ... I was over it. I thought what's the point? If you can't follow those principles that we're supposed to apply in our group ... I'm not going to keep doing this” (GC02).

5.3.3 Governance structure

Some group contacts expressed concern about the role and appointment of the OAC. More clarity, or more communication, appears to be needed about the role of the OAC, as one participant suggested:

I find the OAC is becoming more of a policy-making body than a communication body. Is it a policy-making body? No. But they're putting themselves above the groups. It's another step up. In other words, you've got groups, then you've got the OAC. If you're talking about a family tree, you should have COTA and the OAC on one line, and you'd have an arrow going between the two of them. Then you'd have an arrow going from OAC to groups and also an arrow going from COTA to groups. ... It relies basically on COTA and the OAC working hand-in-glove with each other to make sure that the messages that are coming out are the same, and that answers to questions and stuff are the same as well. In other words, consistency. I don't believe that the consistency is as well as it should be. (GC11)

There was also concern expressed about whether the OAC were able to represent the OM:NI men adequately to COTA Victoria:

[The OAC are] not democratically elected. They're appointed by COTA Vic. I found that out of touch with current day practice. We're supposed to be [represented by the OAC] ... I can't see how that can happen unless the facilitators elect the group to represent them. But the group that represents them - it's better now ... but they didn't usually consult with the facilitators. So, they were putting opinions to the COTA board in effect, which was their opinion and their opinion of what the rest of us felt. But they didn't know what the rest of us felt because they never asked us. Now they do tend to a lot more. ... But if it's going to represent men, then there needs to be at least one who is elected by the men and truly does represent men. (GC02)

It appears that OM:NI participants are most concerned with their own 'local' issues, such as the effective functioning of their own local group, the sustainability of the local group, and the logistics of securing an appropriate and affordable venue for meetings. Most OM:NI participants appear not to want to be involved with other broader issues such as growth, funding, or policy development for older men, which are issues that are of more concern to the OAC and to COTA Victoria.

The groups themselves tend to want to just deal with their own issues within the groups and see themselves as a unit in themselves. Now, that's a strength and weakness because they don't particularly want to be reporting to the OAC. They don't particularly want to be reporting to COTA Victoria because we're OM:NI and we're a unit within our own particular area ... and we're just going to focus on us. So that insularness (sic) is always going to be a weakness within the structure itself. (OACFG)

There appears to be a lack of structural support for those men who are keen to see changes. If a man has an idea for recruitment or establishing a new group, it is perceived that there is no/very limited support from COTA Victoria or the OAC, as one group contact described:

[At a representatives' meeting] There was a contact there and he said... if you go to (region) there's a lot of retired men sitting in coffee shops talking with not much to do. He said, why doesn't OM:NI set up a couple of groups down there? He was told to go down and do it himself. He's pulled right back now. I explain like it's in the army where they say, well someone volunteer, and you stand still, and the other 20 men in the troupe step back. You're the volunteer! It's not a good way. I would remind everyone in the steering committee that we're all old, retired men, and since retiring we should be taking it easy. I don't mind doing a little bit, but I don't like being given extra work when we haven't volunteered. (GC06)

5.3.4 Format of representatives' meeting

There was some discontent among the group contacts about the content, format, and practical arrangements of the representatives' meetings. Some contacts expressed disappointment about lack of progress made at the meetings: *"They have difficulty making any progress because they don't want to do the work. They don't want to be involved, like raising money for advertising and so on"* (GC09). As illustrated in the previous section, the group contacts expected that the representatives' meeting would be conducted using the same (or similar) principles and values to OM:NI meetings. They became disgruntled when they witnessed that the representatives' meeting was conducted differently than OM:NI group meetings:

I just found more and more that there was little or no value coming out of the meetings. My view was that the principles we had about listening to other men without interrupting and so on, they were not being observed. There was not supposed to be a hierarchy but there was a hierarchy. Do you know what I mean? That's how I perceived it. I know about a third of the group of facilitators never went to the meetings. But I don't know why. I never spoke to any of them. (GC02)

GC05 considered that there ought to be more representatives' meetings per year and that the meetings should be longer than two hours: *"They have three meetings a year, which is not enough, and the time is not enough ... I reckon one or two more. It's a long time between people knowing what's going on"*. There is perhaps a communication problem occurring here, as we believe that currently four representatives' meetings are scheduled per annum.

Several group contacts cited practical challenges to being able or willing to attend face-to-face representatives' meetings. One group contact experienced physical disability and finds it very difficult to travel to the meetings. For some group contacts the travel time and the stress of travelling were deterrents: *"it's an hour's drive there, an hour's drive back, finding parking and all that sort of stuff was a pain"* (GC04); *"[The rep meetings are] held at nine o'clock in the morning at Canterbury [laughs]. I'd be getting up at the crack of dawn to drive to Canterbury"* (GC13). For any groups in regional areas, travel to Melbourne to attend a meeting is likely to be prohibitive.

The participants highlighted some challenges with the name OM:NI, including:

- It is not a well-known name: *"If you say, 'Oh I'm in OMNI', no one has ever heard of the word OMNI, and no-one's ever heard of the word COTA. So, they're two terms that simply aren't known in the community very much, which becomes a problem in its own right"* (OACFG)
- The name does not inspire men in the young-old cohort: *"If it is a COTA programme for men over 55 that are retired ... for the future of OM:NI, I really do think they need to refresh themselves and they need to look seriously to change their name cause at the moment, I don't think the name is attractive to people below the age of 65 anyway"* (GC06)

- It does not accurately describe the nature of the meetings: *"I could talk to you about OMNI, the name OMNI for a long time. But I prefer to call them men's discussion groups because that's exactly what it is"* (GC11).

5.3.6 Lack of cultural diversity

There was acknowledgement that the majority of OM:NI participants are Caucasian. This was attributed to a range of reasons including the history of how OM:NI commenced, the fact that most of the recruitment was completed by existing members, and that men who find it difficult to communicate in English do not appear to get as much value from attending OM:NI groups as participants who are proficient in English.

How come OM:NI is in some parts of Melbourne and not others? So, it seems the West and the North don't have much OM:NI representation. I wonder whether that's partly the social demographics of those suburbs and so on? You might end up with a lot of linguistic diversity, maybe that's a challenge? ... It's very much old white Anglo Saxon males. (GC12)

5.4 Weaknesses: What needs improving with COTA Victoria?

5.4.1 More understanding for older male perspectives

The OM:NI men did not see themselves represented well by COTA Victoria staff, as a number of OAC members related:

I don't quite see how a younger [person] ... can really understand how to interact with older men... there's a generation gap... The way you need to deal with older men differs significantly from the way you need to deal with younger guys (GC02).

A lot of the COTA people are female... I'm not trying to be critical or sexist or any of those particular things, but it would be nice for someone from COTA to come along to some of the meetings because you can really only generate the real feel for OMNI and how it exists if you come along to a meeting (OACFG).

5.4.2 More stability of staff

The continuity of COTA Victoria staff was viewed as a problem, as one group contact related, *"One of the biggest issues of COTA is that they don't retain staff very well. You've got a new person doing this job every five or six months"* (GC11). The OACFG considered that many of the COTA Victoria staff did not understand what OM:NI was and how it worked. *"Continuity is very important so that ... they can take the minutes of the OAC meeting and the reps meeting and understand and not make silly gaffs in the minutes that I have to go back over and feed back and forth. I don't want to do that. I expect somebody who understands what we do [and] can sit in a meeting and get what is happening. That's important"* (OACFG).

5.4.3 Better resourcing

There is no budget allocation for OM:NI and this means that the work of OM:NI is currently being completed almost entirely by volunteer labour. However, by utilising only volunteers, the work that is to be completed is dependent on having the right volunteer available, with the right skill set, and the right amount of time available to complete the task. Having access to the "just right volunteer" cannot be guaranteed, and therefore work cannot be reliably completed with only volunteers. Lack of funding support means that COTA Victoria is currently unable to assist with supporting improvement or growing OM:NI, as one group contact suggested,

COTA Victoria is trying to do too much on a shoestring budget. When you try to do that, then a lot of things are not going to happen when perhaps they should have. Or when you'd like them to. It does get a little frustrating. ... Until this point ... all of the planning, all of the growth, and all of the maintenance has been done ... by the participants and by the OAC committee. ... There has been lots of encouragement [from COTA Victoria] but not a lot of funding available, whereby things could be funded properly (GC07)

For OM:NI to function more effectively, and for the program to be expanded the participants wanted COTA Victoria to take more responsibility for helping and supporting OM:NI participants, including the provision of funding for staff support. *"COTA has said that OM:NI is one of our programs and are asking us, the advisory group, to make action. We're not laying about here I can assure you. But to make actions ... [without] becoming overloaded ... is for COTA to recognise this IS one of their functions"* (OACFG).



5.4.4 More support and faster responsiveness

Participants commented that OM:NI provides information to COTA Victoria about issues that affect older people: "There's been a royal commission into views of the elderly last year [and] we get asked if we'd like to put a submission in or put our tuppence worth in if we want to. We get asked that way from COTA, an email comes down. We do get asked different things" (GC06). However, they felt that when OM:NI participants wanted something from COTA Victoria, assistance was lacking. As one group contact indicated, "They want us to support them, but it seems to be the other way around when we want support" (GC10). The participants considered that COTA Victoria was very slow to respond if something was needed from them, as one group contact

related, "COTA is a really slow-moving organisation.... I just find that if you want things done it takes a while. We need some flyers ... Anything that you want takes time" (GC03). Another group contact stated, "[There] is a bureaucratic delay and complication with just about every step taken. You think my goodness, can it take any longer than this? Then eventually it happens and with great sigh of relief. Then you get onto the next bump" (GC07). The OACFG noted that recently, with the appointment of a new staff member to assist the OAC, there had been improved support from COTA Victoria, as one participant described, "If [staff member] says it's going to happen, it happens. That's a hell of a improvement on the past... [when] there was a lot of talk and little action. That's changed quite considerably" (OACFG).

5.5 Opportunities

5.5.1 Marketing strategies

A range of marketing strategies were suggested by participants, as illustrated in Table 5. Dropping pamphlets in letter boxes was also suggested as a strategy, however it has drawbacks, in terms of the cost of producing the pamphlets and the labour required to distribute the pamphlets. In addition, the effectiveness of this strategy was found to be variable; sometimes it worked well and at other times it was not effective.

Table 5. Potential marketing strategies

| | |
|--|--|
| Marketing provided by meeting venue | <i>There's an ad[vertisement] on the community house website, and their newsletter says 'Oh we have this group of blokes who meet called OM:NI'... Maybe we could put some pamphlets out in the community house because community house has like 50 courses; all sorts of people come through. (GC12)</i> |
| Marketing partnerships with retirement villages | <i>These retirement centres ... [some] are very large, extremely large.... [The residents have] all got friends and contacts. Every so often you give them a gee-up, say, 'Look, do you know anybody who might like to come along and see how we're going here, and they might like to join?' Somebody will say, 'Oh, yeah, I've got a chap.' There's always someone. (GC01)</i> |
| Word-of-mouth: using personal networks of existing OM:NI participants | <i>We occasionally have a bring-along-a-friend meeting. That has been fairly successful. (GC01)</i> |
| Distributing flyers | <i>The development of flyers - just a single page or a narrow piece of paper ... is really valuable just to be able to give out to people. (GC03)</i> |
| Sharing anecdotes about the value of OM:NI | <i>We wanted to build a library of anecdotes, reports back, feedback from men who are in and who have left, maybe even from the wives of deceased participants. You know, what did this mean to Bill? And some of these things they bring tears to your eyes, they really do. (OACFG)</i> |
| Marketing through clubs and community organisations | <i>The other place that marketing could be attached to is all the Lions programs, the Rotary, the University of the Third Age. There are heaps of places that we could market but we haven't (OACFG)</i> |
| Marketing to women | <i>If they can get out into women's groups, you know CWA, for instance, would be a classic example of expansion through the wives who are very active in discussion and know that hubby needs to go out there and do something similar but doesn't have the platform to do it. (OACFG)</i> |
| Marketing through councils | <i>We get support from councils. They'll put information in their particular newsletters. (OACFG)</i> |
| Advertising in local newspapers | <i>We spoke to a couple of the local newspapers and got a bit of a write-up in them. (GC11)</i> |
| Using signage | <i>I used to put a little billboard out the front with 'OM:NI old men' and I used to put up the topic we discussed... Occasionally we would get a few just drop in. (GC14)</i> |

5.5.2 Growth opportunities

5.5.2.1 Partnerships

There is a potential opportunity for a local OM:NI group to partner with a local community organisation for the mutual benefit of both organisations. Some group contacts related stories where they had negotiated for OM:NI participants to join clubs or organisations for a highly reduced price, in exchange for free use of their premises and insurance coverage. This was seen as beneficial in that it provided the groups with venue support, and the clubs or organisations with additional membership. GC06 proposed that a partnership could be formed with another community organisation, and that organisation could promote OM:NI to its members. In this instance OM:NI would augment the activities provided by the community organisation, while at the same time knowledge of OM:NI and numbers of OM:NI participants might increase.

A strategic alliance with a group - it could be hypothetically Senior Citizens' Clubs of Victoria, ah RSL, ah Victorian Bowling Club Association... anything like that ... where they might have men that want to get together and spend some mateship time... Just imagine if the Royal Victorian Bowling Association, we'd got on board with them ... the old men that have lost their wives that go to the bowls, not really to bowl, just to catch up with two or three other men in the same situation. (GC06)

Some community organisations consider there is tremendous value in providing more community activities for older men. In these instances, the organisations may be prepared to partner with OM:NI and COTA Victoria to assist with venue provision and marketing support.

The CEO of the local community centre wanted to look after single men and lonely men and people who were shy and so she said, 'I'm really desperate to have just a men's group'. They probably run, I'm guessing, 15 programs or so and she really encouraged us to get involved ... she was really keen ... her initiative and her involvement and her resilience was terrific in sort of getting it up... She was quite exceptional and if she hadn't of been there then I wouldn't have been involved, because she was prepared to do a lot of the marketing (OACFG)

Some participants suggested partnering with the Men's Shed Association, in recognition that both OM:NI and Men's Sheds ultimately aimed to provide more support to men. Thus, both organisations have similar goals and might benefit from collaborating. "Whether or not we could have a group within the Men's Shed or groups within the Men's Shed where guys were more interested in chatting more so than doing physical hands work, may be an opportunity. Perhaps [OM:NI] could work in with the Men's Shed" (GC08).

5.5.2.2 Maintenance of low cost

Another opportunity for growth is that OM:NI groups do not have a lot of up-front costs, as they are completely reliant on volunteers. As noted previously, venues where meetings are held are often quite supportive, either by providing free or low-cost rental of the meeting space, and some venues also provide additional support such as free access to tea and coffee. In contrast to Men's Sheds, which require complex, and costly, policies, procedures, and insurances, due to the fact that men are using power tools, sharp implements, hazardous materials, and other potentially high-risk equipment, OM:NI is a low-risk and inexpensive activity:

One of the benefits we have is we don't need a lot of money. You can set up a new OMNI group for... Almost nothing... A couple of grand would cover an inaugural meeting and a lunch and the publicity materials and so forth and you can do it quickly. I know ... some have been trying to set up a Men's Shed ... Oh, what a pain, just trying to get a premises that's acceptable, and then getting money, and then getting planning ... I think they've given up. So, it's not easy for Men's Shed ... I think one of our big benefits is, we can go out with a bit of zip and start a new program ... for very small money. (OACFG)

5.5.3 Sustainability opportunities

5.5.3.1 Learning and development for OM:NI leaders

OM:NI facilitators are an essential part of sustainability for OM:NI. Good facilitation increases the likelihood that OM:NI groups work well and are satisfactory and enjoyable for the OM:NI participants. When facilitation is poor, OM:NI participants may vote with their feet and stop attending OM:NI meetings. Therefore, more opportunities for OM:NI leaders to develop their facilitation skills can help to improve OM:NI's overall sustainability:

We actually have a plan in place ... to get all the guys in the south-eastern area ... [who are] interested in facilitation, [to] get together [and] have a pow wow, more or less a training session, if you like. To broaden their knowledge, give them some guidelines, and generally pick each other's brains to see what works and what doesn't work. (OACFG)



5.5.3.2 Socialising to build group cohesion and commitment

GC06 started inviting all the OM:NI participants in his group to social gatherings (having lunch together, having a coffee). He found that these social meetings increased the likelihood of men attending the formal OM:NI meetings.

We used to just have one monthly meeting at the community centre. ... I raised the point, 'look if anyone's interested, my friend here and myself are going for a counter lunch at the local club next Wednesday, if no one's got anything on, feel free to join us'. Well, the next Wednesday, most of them joined us for a counter lunch. ... everyone had a ball... And then I also used to have coffees with a couple of guys, or friends, that I clicked with. When you join an organisation, you'll click with one or two people. So, we'd have regular coffees and I said, 'you know, we should invite a few more guys down'. Same thing happened. Okay, the first Wednesday of the month ... we go down to Joe Bloe's for a coffee ... and since those two things were added to our meetings, the group's just grown and grown and grown. (GC06)

GC05's group engaged in "outings in the bus and also by train and tram. Mainly on senior's week we get free train rides". Similarly, GC03's group participated in outings that were initiated and organised by an enthusiastic man.

This guy was a walker and he used to go into the city with walking groups, and so he took us in, and he walked us around ... Another time ... we finished up going up to Parliament House and, prior to that, we'd been down into the gold chambers of the Treasury place alongside. It was his initiative and his confidence of actually taking us in: this is the tram that we're going to have to get, this is the train we're going to have to get, we'll go this way because Joe [pseudonym] really struggles with steps... It's really good to have someone within the group that's got the initiative to do that. (GC03)

As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and precautions to reduce transfer of infection, some groups started having social meetings at outdoor venues. These meetings were found to be very enjoyable and beneficial.

[Our OM:NI group] only meet once a month. I think some of the groups have an informal meeting ... in-between that every fortnight. I think that's something I'd like to do with our group ... [due to COVID-19] we had our last meeting ... outside [at a café] ... We all just sat around. We ordered coffees and cake and all the rest of it. There was about 10 or 12 people there. It was usual numbers, and it was very enjoyable. So, that's something I would like to do more of, and I think that's going to foster more relationships and friendship. ... and it just makes the next meeting even better because you've just seen them two weeks ago and here we go, we're doing it again [and] that's terrific. (OACFG)

5.5.4 Communication improvements

5.5.4.1 OAC support for group contacts

At the beginning of 2022, an initiative was introduced to increase contact with each OM:NI group: each OAC member was assigned 5-6 OM:NI groups to contact on an informal basis.

That's got real potential... in that it supports the group in the area and so they're not isolated as one group with very little contact. Each of us has the potential then to pull together the contacts that we have and almost make a little island within the OM:NI coterie of groups and I think that's very valuable because... in a way our autonomy can be an enemy because we're out there as isolated little bubbles and apart from the reps [representatives] meetings don't have a lot of contact with anybody. (OACFG)

5.5.4.2 Use of videoconferencing

Reacting to COVID-19 restrictions meant that some OM:NI groups used videoconferencing to meet rather than meeting face-to-face. Although it is not an ideal medium for group meetings, it can increase participation for men who find it difficult to travel due to ill health, are isolating from others to prevent spread of infections, or who live a long distance from other OM:NI participants.

Zoom has been wonderful as far as I'm concerned for this period. ... Look, it's so easy once you, I mean all I had to do was click on that note that you sent me and I'm here. As long as you know how to wade through the, there are a couple of little do you want to have cookies, do you want to do this, that and the other thing. You've got to wade through things, which could probably be made a little bit easier. But almost anybody could get onto this. ... I like the idea of having a Zoom club, I think that would work very well. ... and older people are able to use this technology now. ... Or they could easily be taught. (GC01).

Videoconferencing could be used for both an online OM:NI group for a select cohort of men and to host representatives' meetings. Currently, as indicated in the previous section, logistical difficulties make it very difficult/impossible for all group contacts to travel to attend a face-to-face meeting. Therefore, a videoconference meeting provides a more inclusive alternative.



5.6 Threats

5.6.1 Ageing, attrition, and lack of succession planning

Participants from both the OAC and group contacts described the threat that ageing and lack of succession planning posed to the existing OM:NI groups:

You're on a slippery slope because your age group means that you're going to lose people, rather than gain them... as they get older, their health will deteriorate. You'll either lose them permanently or they'll be less involved because of their poorer health. It's a constant need to replenish every group. (GC07)

Lack of recruitment is a big [threat] ... Part of our business model is that we are mortal and we're getting into our last decade. When we started in Victoria that was 2004, a lot of the groups that have folded were the initial groups ... [because they were started] 16 [or] 17 years ago. (OACFG)

The biggest threat to the ongoing sustainability of OM:NI is that constant renewal of OM:NI participants is needed, as one group contact suggested, *"If you don't spend enough time regrowing yourself, then you will die out. That's a fact of life"* (GC07). Recruitment of OM:NI participants needs to occur frequently, because not only does lack of participants mean the end of the group, the current participants are ageing and their capacity to participate, to provide leadership, and to recruit new participants are also likely to decrease as they get older. As one group contact suggested, *"It needs one or two blokes in the group to take on board the recruiting role of making sure you replace somebody who has left"* (GC11).

Ongoing renewal of OM:NI ought to include ongoing recruitment and training for OM:NI leadership roles, which include being group facilitators, contacts, and members of the OAC. OM:NI group contacts *"should be endeavouring to replace themselves, thereby ... we're always going to have somebody to take over the reins, if you go on holidays or unfortunately if you leave this world"* (OACFG). Having turnover of OM:NI leadership can be beneficial for the leaders, for the groups, and for the OM:NI organisation, as one group contact suggested, *"I don't want to do it [be the group facilitator] all of the time... for the health of the group it needs someone else in there as well and I appreciate that"* (GC14).

A policy of renewal and succession is needed so that men do not feel "stuck" in a leadership role, and so that they step aside for others to take a turn:

The old hierarchy is there ... they don't think they're keeping people out, but they don't let new ones in... So, by the time they get to late seventies and eighties, they literally die, or they can't do it anymore. There's nobody willing to take over because there's hardly anyone left anyway. That's the danger with OM:NI groups. (GC02)

5.6.2 Marketing and recruitment are challenging

Although the OM:NI group contacts could see the necessity for ongoing recruitment of OM:NI participants, they also acknowledged that doing so was *"a real challenge"* (GC08). As GC04 describes, current recruitment activities can take a lot of time and effort and yet yield very few new participants:

There are events ... like street markets and stuff like that occasionally and one or two of us might go down with the placard saying, 'come on, come and talk to us about this' ... But we don't generally generate a lot of new men coming along... I really like OMNI ... but I'm not so keen expending energy any further for promoting the OMNI group... Mainly because we've done that, and it's really produced very little fruit. ...the enthusiasm for that was once there, but because we're a stable group, we don't necessarily want to keep banging our heads against the wall with something that we know isn't going to necessarily bring more people (GC04)

As GC04 also alluded to, there is likely to be a reluctance among OM:NI participants to do the work of marketing and recruitment, especially if this is completed in a voluntary capacity.

You also need as drivers, people who are really, really interested in the OM:NI concept and prepared to go out. And to be quite honest ... within the groups that I'm generalising with there's not a lot of people who wanna go out and say, "I will try to spread the word. I will be a disciple" in inverted commas. I reckon there's not a lot ... So, the promotion of OM:NI I reckon is very challenging and I think what happened when many of the groups were started initially 2010 or thereabouts, I think there was a person who was appointed by COTA ... who went out and marketed a whole lot of OM:NI groups. (OACFG)

5.6.3 Reluctance to take on leadership roles

Similarly to recruitment, the OM:NI men recognise the need for leadership renewal and for new leaders to step up, however many feel reluctant to take on such roles.

I put it to my group, who would like to take over? But nobody wanted to take over... Frankly I think there were some of the men who might have been able to do it. But they just don't want to do it... I won't be surprised if you find from other groups that there's a real trend on at the moment ... They just want to go to things and enjoy them now. They'll participate. They won't sit back and let you do all the work. So my guys are great... they help set up. When we get to refreshment time I don't even have to ask for volunteers. The guys just step in and do it. At the end they help pack up and clean up. That's the nature of our group, which pleases me greatly... [but] there's a big trend going on at the moment that a lot of people are withdrawing from jobs with responsibility. (GC02)

Sometimes, this reluctance was associated with the fact that they have previously held leadership positions and volunteer positions and now, they want to experience participating without the need to take on additional responsibilities. Some men appear to be disinclined to volunteer as a group contact because they are put off by the paperwork (or rather digital interaction of form filling) required (such as completing criminal checks). Perhaps also there are men like GC14, who was willing to help with leadership but ended up “doing it all”. Talking about succession planning, GC14 said, “There were some fairly old gentlemen in the room and eventually, being one of the younger ones, I put my hand up to say “yes, I’ll help out”, and I ended up with the lot unfortunately, but that’s the way it works.”

5.6.4 Bureaucratic barriers

COTA Victoria’s recent policy change to formalise their volunteering procedures has led to some unintended consequences for OM:NI. Some of the OM:NI participants feel affronted by the need to complete police checks and therefore they are unwilling to formally become OM:NI group contacts:

If you start to put some roadblocks in place. ... if you start to formalise too much stuff, guys will turn round and say, ‘no, not interested’ ... You go up and say to a 75-76-year-old, ‘look mate, if you’re going to be a contact for us for this group, you’ve got to do a police check’. He looks and says, ‘why? Why do I need to do that?’ So, why does he need to do it? Well, then they come back with, ‘oh, it’s an insurance requirement’. Aha, an insurance requirement, and this has been told to us 20 years after we started with OMNI? ... Come on, give us a break. ... That just seems so stupid to me. I’ve been working with people in COTA for 15-20 years, and all of a sudden somebody says, all contact people have to have a police check and they will become registered volunteers. (GC11)

Some of the OM:NI men fear that what they perceive to be bureaucratic requirements from COTA Victoria, may cause unwanted and unnecessary division and upset for OM:NI participants.

COTA is now saying that unless you’ve got a registered volunteer in your group, then your group is not an OM:NI group which, to me, is really shattering and really bureaucratic and not really accepted by me... I can’t get anyone. No one there’s prepared to do the COTA volunteer status situation. So [COTA Victoria is] actually saying ... ‘well, they can’t meet as an OM:NI group’. Now I could go back and tell these guys... ‘you’re no longer an OM:NI group.’ They’ll say, ‘we don’t give a stuff if we’re not, we’re just a discussion group, we’re just guys coming together [and they might leave the OM:NI organisation] ... I reckon groups that have been around for a while, if they’re then told, ‘well, look, you’re no longer an OM:NI group because there’s no volunteer here’, I reckon that that’s pretty damning. (GC03)

5.6.5 Poor facilitation

The core function of OM:NI is to engage in discussion. Therefore, the role of the group facilitator is vital. The skill of the group facilitator can make or break the discussion:

Facilitation is a very important skill. And I think even in those discussions which can be pretty wide across the table, it’s important to note when John’s just pulling back a bit and not saying much and find a way, but not pointing to him and saying, ‘John what do you think?’ But rather getting a bit of a segue going and bring John back into the meeting. I’m actually keen to promote facilitation skills at the reps meeting this coming year. (OACFG)

The value of facilitation is obvious if facilitation is performed unskillfully, as one group contact related:

We had one poor chap, a hell of a nice chap, he wanted to talk about depression ... and the guy that was running it said, ‘no we’re not going to talk about that’ and this guy got quite upset. He never came back again... It was the way he was told, not that he’s told ‘no’... It could have been ‘look, we’ll see how we go. I don’t know whether that’s the right thing to talk about next month. Oh, you and me will have to talk about that.’ You know what I mean? I’m not going to say, ‘we’re not going to talk about that’ in front of 20 men. So, and he did suffer from depression. So he’s gone. I do keep in contact with him by the way. So you gotta be careful. (GC06)

Facilitators also require skill to manage individuals who are out of tune with the needs of other group members.

From time to time, you do find really, really difficult people to deal with... A lot of older men want to live in the past. Whenever you open the discussion and go around the room, instead of talking about what they’ve done in the last month, it inevitably leads back to what they did in their past life. But of course, that’s not really what we’re asking them to talk about. One particular chap, he didn’t seem to be able to talk about anything else. You could see the guys’ eyes rolling over. Like here we go again... It got to the point where people were starting to really get annoyed about the whole thing. He would not stop. I had to take him aside a number of times privately and tell him about it. Bring it to his attention. Then finally he backed off. (GC07)



5.6.6 Cliques

There are several different types of cliques that have potential to cause difficulty in OM:NI groups. A value of OM:NI is inclusivity and acceptance of a diversity of men. However, if a particular group has too many men of one type of working background, there is potential for individual people to feel excluded, and ultimately to stop attending:

If you have half a dozen truckies, and a couple of bricklayers, and then you've got one or two guys that might be professors or something like that in a room, the conversation could talk the professors out of staying there because the discussion is so different to the levels that they talk at. I'm not trying to say that one is more important than the other, but they do talk differently, and the reverse can apply to. ... This is a danger ... the possibility of one group or another being pushed out. Not deliberately, I wouldn't say that, but just because the conversations don't go where there are interests. So, if there's interest they'll stay. (OACFG)

Much of the ongoing recruitment of OM:NI participants is by word-of-mouth, which can work well. However, there is also a risk of lack of diversity and cliques arising.

You can finish up inviting your friends to join but I'm not too keen on that idea because in the end you might finish up developing a clique. If everyone went out and brought in a friend, then it might well become the friends tend to clique together and it's not as open as it would be that if people came off the streets. (GC03)

Existing OM:NI groups can become very close due to years of friendship and shared discussion. This is seen as a benefit of OM:NI, which it is, and yet sometimes this sense of closeness can inadvertently exclude newcomers.

[There was an OM:NI group in which] they weren't prepared to invite other guys in... [When] the odd one or

two [attended, they] ... found it was a closed shop ... It was a clique by the convenience of being associated for so long. It just became automatic. Anyone trying to move into that space found it impossible. They didn't grow at all. They gradually died. (GC07)

5.6.7 Insufficient resourcing

The participants wanted to see OM:NI growing and thriving, but they acknowledged that COTA Victoria did not currently have the available funding to support such growth. This is seen as a major impediment to growth in OM:NI.

COTA is funded to do particular programs of work and its resources are stretched ... There is no spare dollars that are floating to throw in on top of OM:NI... It's been a drain to develop OM:NI because it's always been done by the members of the OAC dipping into their own pockets to travel to areas. There's no way known they can travel to Mildura to set up a group of meetings for instance without it costing them a lot of money. That's what's hoped to be found from a funding source that allows that to happen in future... So that's the dilemma I guess in relation to what can be provided to resource that expansion. (OACFG)

Another resourcing threat is the ability to find and retain access to a suitable meeting venue for no- or low-cost, as one of the group contacts identified:

It became costly for us to maintain the venue where we were. We've had two homes since then.... What's restraining our group is venue and public liability... finding an acceptable venue by people who are quite comfortable with the fact it's just a male group only... Everybody wants money these days... We're happy to do what we do but we just want somewhere to be able to do it and it's got to be somewhere where you can get there ... The train station is 300 metres. Parking, right there. We go for lunch after the meeting or before the meeting. (GC14)



6 OM:NI Participant Perspectives

This section presents the data from the Stage 3 survey of OM:NI participants, and identifies trends and experiences associated with participation in their OM:NI groups. First, the demographic characteristics of the survey sample are described. Next, detailed descriptive and free text data are presented to provide a picture of what attracted participants to OM:NI, their experiences of participating in OM:NI, the impacts of COVID-19 on OM:NI participation, and their motivations for future attendance. As the following sections describe, participants benefited significantly from their participation in OM:NI, and the majority of participants were very happy with their experiences. In summary:

- *Strengths* of OM:NI included the ability of the program structure to foster social connectivity among a diverse group of men in an all-male environment, and to provide an opportunity for men to discuss their needs and speak out. Participants valued the flexible meeting agendas, and the combination of a formal and informal component to OM:NI meetings. From the demographic data, it can also be posited that OM:NI is particularly attractive to a highly educated, primarily Anglo-Saxon cohort.
- *Weaknesses* included the declining group numbers and sporadic attendance by current participants, monopolisation of group discussion by a minority of participants, and a lack of engaging discussion topics.
- *Opportunities* included increasing diversity in OM:NI group activities (such as having more social and special interest outings and inviting guest speakers) and in discussion topics. Participants expressed a preference for more input into discussion topics and more shared group facilitation. In light of the weaknesses identified, participants identified a preference for more ethnic diversity within groups and increased attention to recruitment and promotion.
- *Threats* to the sustainability of OM:NI groups included the ageing of current cohorts of OM:NI participants and the impacts of COVID-19 on OM:NI participants' engagement. A minority of participants also highlighted the lack of accessible, cost-effective, appropriate, and permanent venues for OM:NI group meetings and the impacts of formalising OM:NI from a governance perspective.

6.1 Participant characteristics

Demographic characteristics

- Survey participants were primarily aged in their 70s (30% aged 70-74, and 31% aged 75-79), with 13% aged 85-89 and 11% aged 80-84 years. 9% were aged between 65 and 69, with 4% aged 90 and above and 3% aged between 60 and 64 years.¹

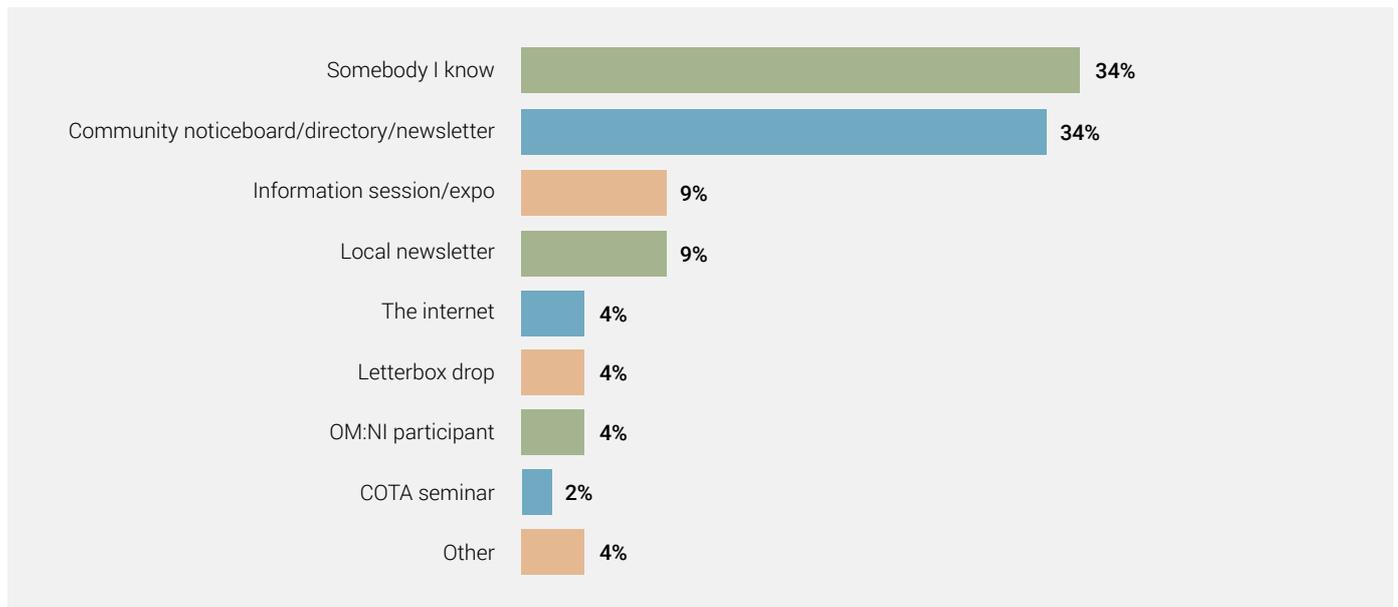
- Participants were largely from an Anglo-Saxon background. The majority of participants were born in Australia (77%), followed by England (8%) and the Netherlands (4%). The remaining 11% of participants hailed from 8 different countries. Most participants spoke English at home (96%), with only four percent of participants speaking a language other than English at home.
- Participants were relatively highly educated, with almost half of the participants (44%) possessing a university level education (29% university degree or diploma, and 15% with a postgraduate degree). 97% of the sample had completed secondary school, and 23% had a trade or business qualification.
- Participants were, or had been, employed in a range of professions, of which many were white-collar professions, with management (13%), trades (12%), engineering (10%) or teaching/training (9%) the most commonly reported.
- The majority of participants were retired (98%), with 2% working part time or self-employed.
- Most participants (84%) were married or in a relationship, with 10% divorced or separated, 5% widowed and 1% never married.
- Most participants resided in the eastern (45%) and northern suburbs (38%) of Melbourne, with 14% residing in southern Melbourne and 4% in regional Victoria.

Characteristics of OM:NI participation

- 98% of participants were currently attending OM:NI groups.
- Participants were attending OM:NI groups across 22 different suburbs, with 7% of participants attending 2 or more OM:NI groups.
- Most participants were long-term attendees of their OM:NI groups, with 29% attending for 7 years or more, and 34% attending for between 4-7 years. 13% had been attending their OM:NI groups for less than one year.
- Consistent with the best-practice literature, word of mouth was the most popular method of finding out about OM:NI (see Figure 4), with 34% referred to OM:NI by someone they knew. Local community noticeboards, directories and newsletters were also a popular method of referral (32%).

1. Some percentages reported may not add to 100% due to rounding.

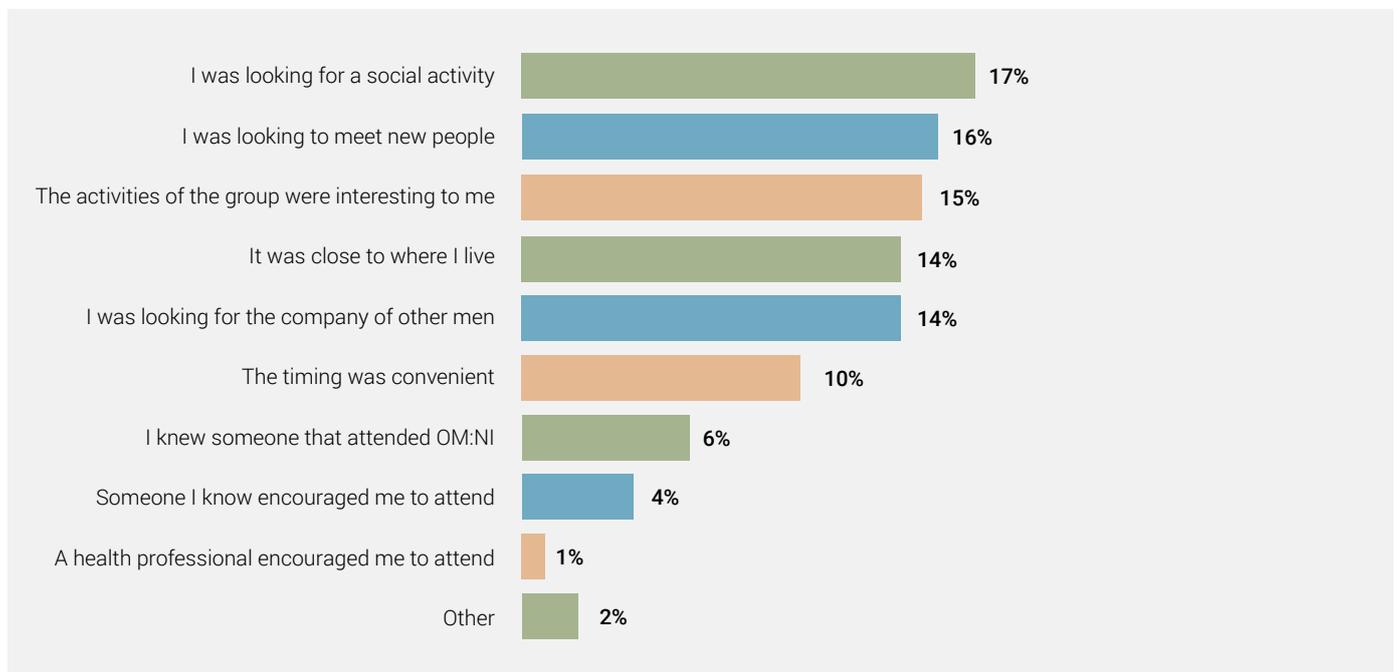
Figure 4. Method of introduction to OM:NI (n=80)



6.2 What attracts men to OM:NI?

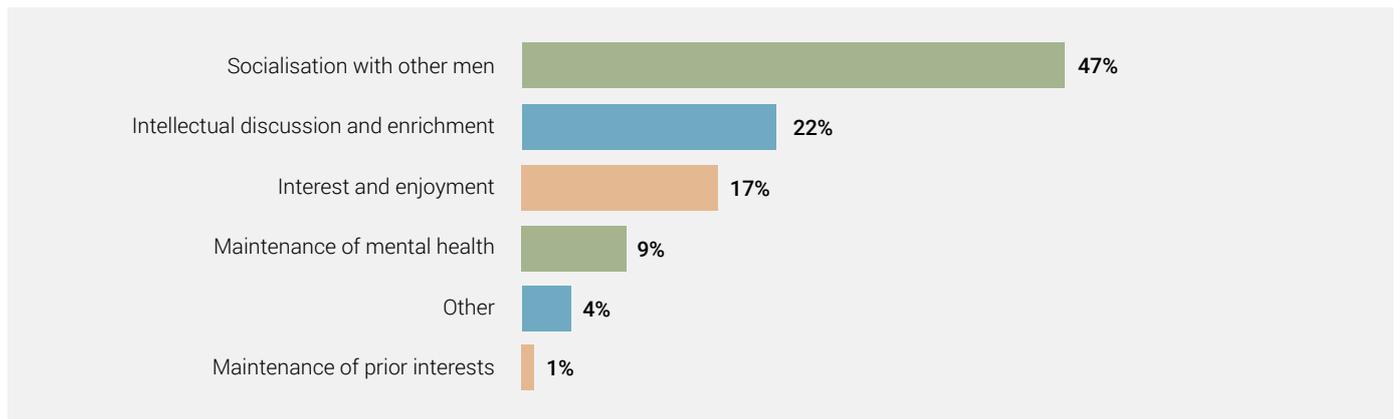
When asked what factors had attracted them to attend an OM:NI group initially, both social and interest-based factors played a significant role (see Figure 5). Participants stated that they had been attracted to the social component (17%) and the ability to meet new people (16%), particularly other men (14%). 15% of men indicated that the activities of the group were interesting, with convenience also a factor in terms of proximity of location (14%) and timing (10%).

Figure 5. Factors that influenced participants to attend OM:NI (n=79)



Those who selected 'other' indicated that they were looking for a 'challenge' in relation to group attendance, and continuity of social activity with men in retirement. However, when asked to select just one primary motivation for attending OM:NI, nearly half of the participants (47%) indicated that socialisation with older men was paramount, with intellectual discussion (22%) playing a secondary role (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Participants' primary motivation for attending OM:NI (n=76)



For those who selected 'other', their primary motivations reflected the in-person nature of the meetings and receiving a direct invitation to attend.

6.3 Participant experiences of OM:NI

In terms of participant feelings about their involvement in OM:NI (see Figure 7), there were **high levels of agreement** (78-88%) that:

- they felt happy and supported, and connected to others, after attending OM:NI
- OM:NI helped to develop and maintain friendships
- OM:NI is a space where they can discuss their needs and have their voice heard among friends (Figure 7, a-d).

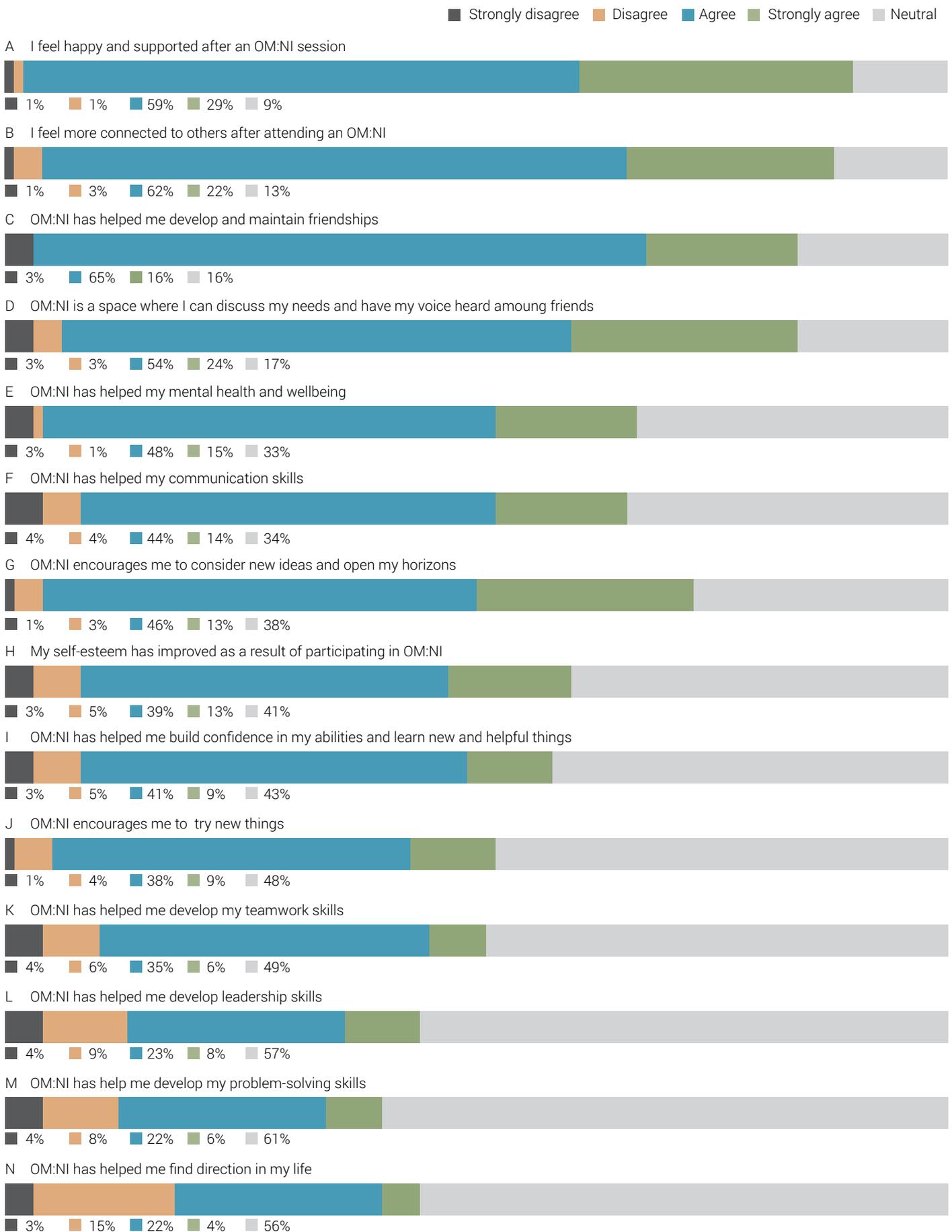
The **majority of participants agreed** (50-63%), but there were also **high levels of neutrality** (33-43%) (Figure 7, e-i) that:

- OM:NI helped their mental health and wellbeing
- OM:NI helped to develop communication skills
- OM:NI encouraged consideration of new ideas and opening of horizons
- Their self-esteem improved through participating in OM:NI
- OM:NI helped build their confidence in their abilities and to learn new and helpful things

There were **similar levels of agreement vs neutrality** (47 vs 48%) that OM:NI encouraged participants to try new things (Figure 7, j). The **majority of participants were neutral** (56-61%) about the capacity of OM:NI to help them to develop their teamwork skills, leadership skills, problem-solving skills, and to find direction in life (Figure 7, k-n).



Figure 7. Participants' feelings about their involvement in OM:NI (n=78-79)



When asked to expand on their experience of being involved in OM:NI in the free text section, the majority of participants reported being very happy with their experiences. They primarily highlighted the social value gained by socialising in a men-only group, in terms of building networks and sharing experiences, as the following quotations illustrate:

I shifted into (town), knowing no-one in the area. Through OM:NI, I have met and made friends with men I would not otherwise have met. Being in OM:NI has enlarged my social circle. Being in OM:NI has enlarged the number of men I can call on for help in an emergency, in an illness, in contacting reliable people to help in home care and home maintenance.

OM:NI is an important activity for me. I would not miss going. It gives me a social activity with just men present. I feel more comfortable expressing my opinions in that environment.

If I did not go to OM:NI I would not have met the men I have over the last 7 plus years.... The knowledge and experiences they have shared has been unique. I don't know any other forum this would occur.

The ability to socialise with men from highly skilled and interesting backgrounds, and from different professional and cultural backgrounds, was valued by participants. Also highlighted was the importance of being in groups that were genuine, non-judgmental, comfortable, and relaxed. The secondary mental health benefits of attending OM:NI were emphasised, as described by one participant:

Enjoy the banter of men and also important to listen to what your fellow members are saying and show you are listening. It may be a cry for help. Not the group's role but

sometimes a quiet word of encouragement after meeting can mean a lot, as men we don't often open up. But when someone cares it means a lot.

A minority of participants indicated that their experience was impacted by lack of numbers within their OM:NI groups or conversely large numbers that inhibited sharing of experiences, and their lack of interest in topics of discussion. One participant expressed fear about the format of OM:NI groups changing and becoming more formalised, stating 'OM:NI does NOT need to be 'improved' and OM:NI members do not need to be 'managed' as if they are paid staff'.

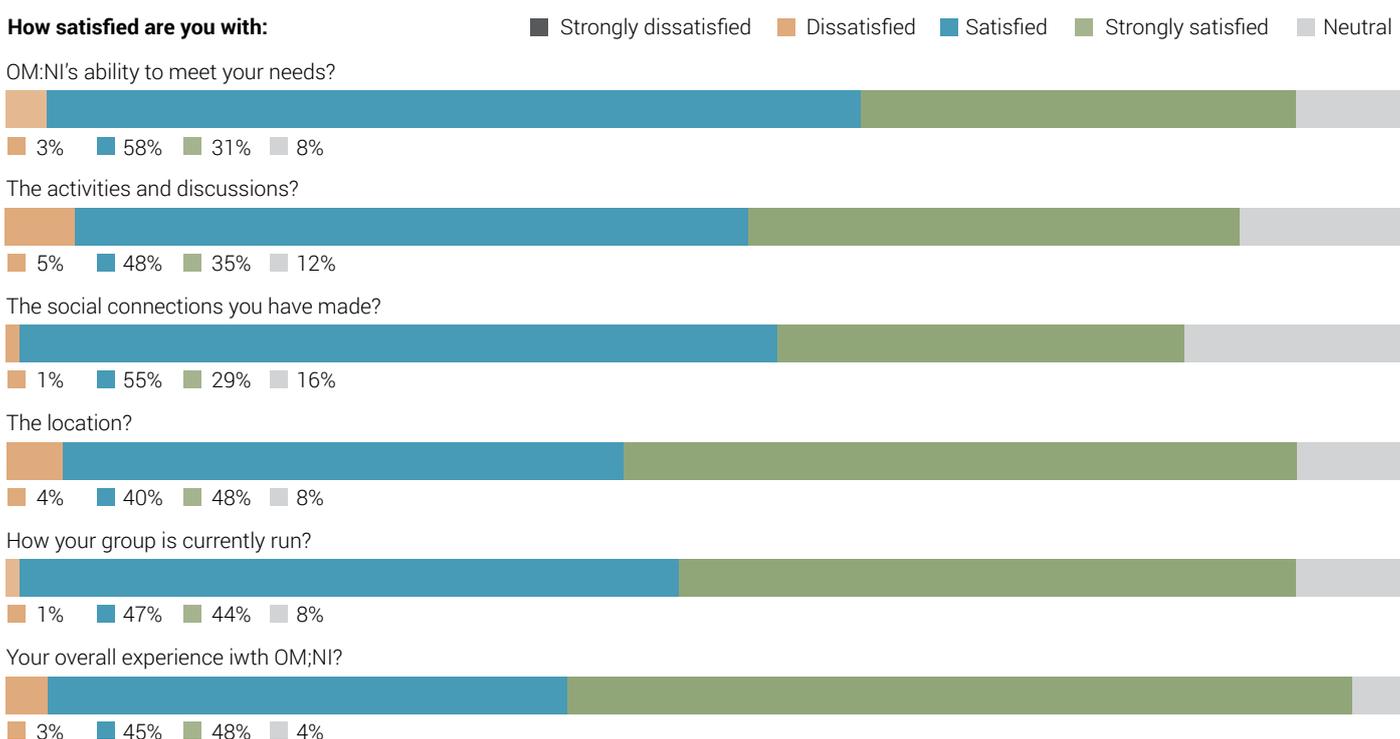
6.3.1 Level of satisfaction

When asked about their level of satisfaction with OM:NI, participant responses were generally positive (see Figure 8). Over 80% of participants were satisfied with their OM:NI group's ability to meet their needs, the location, the activities and the discussions, how the group is currently run, the social connections they have made, and their overall experience with OM:NI.

When asked to specifically identify factors that influenced their satisfaction with OM:NI, participants primarily mentioned the benefits of socialising within respectful groups that could accommodate differences in opinion. However, as raised in the experience section, some noted the challenges of decreasing numbers within their OM:NI groups:

Initially I found our group stimulating and enjoyed each meeting - great leadership at (OM:NI groups). However, with the passage of time we all get older (and sometimes have health problems) and now with COVID as well, numbers are decreasing.

Figure 8. Participants' levels of satisfaction with the OM:NI program (n=77)



6.3.2 Things that OM:NI participants wanted to improve, add or see more of

Participants' identification of what they would like to improve, what they wanted to add, or what they would like to see more of within their OM:NI groups were highly similar across these three categories. As there was a great deal of overlap, the presentation of these findings has been combined.

Many participants indicated that there was nothing that they specifically wanted to improve, add, or see more of. However, as identified in Table 6, most responses in this section were related to increasing diversity in OM:NI activities, by means of introducing guest speakers, social and interest-based outings, and increasing the range of topics for discussion. Aspects related to the structure and facilitation of OM:NI

groups were also raised. Participants' preference was for group facilitation to be shared and for discussion topics to be identified by group members.

Participants desired there to be more active participation for all during group discussions. Therefore, they expressed a wish for more active facilitation to ensure that meetings were not monopolised by more talkative members. Participants were looking for more socialisation opportunities. Participants wanted to see more attention to recruitment and promotion, in order to address problems related to group attrition. To a lesser extent, participants were also concerned with the quality and suitability of venues, particularly in relation to their level of permanence as a meeting location, the comfort provided by the venue, and its affordability.

Table 6: Things OM:NI participants wanted to improve, add, or see more of

| Diversity in OM:NI activities (46 responses) | |
|--|---|
| Guest speakers at meetings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External • Participants from other OM:NI groups/their own OM:NI group | <i>'Maybe an occasional guest speaker on something of interest to the group would assist in avoiding the group becoming a bit insulated/introverted'</i> |
| Outings to places of interest | <i>'Funding to allow each group to be part of some outside activities that we have enjoyed in the past. Such as bus trips to Phillip Island & wineries, war museum, invitations to guest speakers on men's health etc.'</i> |
| New or different topics for discussion/debate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current events • Politics and religion • Health | <i>Discussions of politics and religion. These are banned and I believe [they are] are vital aspects of life'</i> |
| Community service activities Within and external to the group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help sessions • Writing for the public • Public service activities | <i>"Possibly an annual activity that 'serves' the local community. I recognise OM:NI is not a service club like Rotary or Lions, but an outward focus helps build team'</i> |
| Structure and facilitation (36 responses) | |
| Rotation of group facilitators | <i>'A greater number of participants available to run the meetings. When our numbers were better we would take turns in running the meets. I miss that'</i> |
| Selection of discussion topics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advised prior to the meeting | <i>'Have meeting discussion subjects chosen by the group itself. Not discuss a subject chosen by others'</i> |
| Facilitation of discussions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure all individuals participate in discussions; prevent discussions being monopolised • Promote confidentiality and respect • Meeting agendas that allow free discussion and topic-based discussion | <i>'Better control over an individual 'holding-the-floor' for too long' That all members respect the opinions of others more. They are respected mostly but sometimes it slips a little' 'I think the current format of the first half of the time devoted to each person having the floor to say what they wanted, and the second half devoted to discussing a nominated topic works well'</i> |

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Timing and frequency of meetings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting on different days and times of the week • More frequent meetings • Increased length of meetings | <p><i>'I would like the meetings to be more frequent'</i></p> |
| <p>Promotion, recruitment, and retention (26 responses)</p> | |
| <p>More promotion of groups</p> | <p><i>'Please ensure that all OM:NI groups are promoted in every possible way. It is unlikely that senior men will ever know about the benefits of OM:NI. OM:NI needs to be publicised to every senior man throughout Australia. It's much better than 'Men's Shed''</i></p> |
| <p>Starting new groups</p> | <p><i>'Ways to help other groups consolidate after COVID or even start new groups'</i></p> |
| <p>More OM:NI participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater diversity in OM:NI participants | <p><i>'Generate interest in attracting more members. Currently we find men leaving or not attending'</i></p> <p><i>'Perhaps the participation of other ethnic groups, i.e., Asian. However, this would largely depend on location'</i></p> |
| <p>More regular attendance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checking on OM:NI participants who are absent | <p><i>'Would like to see a more regular attendance by all participants'</i></p> |
| <p>Social opportunities (14 responses)</p> | |
| <p>Increased social opportunities outside of regular meetings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular meals and lunches, occasional events with spouses, networking with other OM:NI groups | <p><i>'More functions outside of the meetings'</i></p> <p><i>'Quarterly meeting with other OM:NI groups in the area. Expand the connection with other men'</i></p> |
| <p>More time for casual conversation during meetings</p> | <p><i>'How about chatting in pairs? - at the start of a meeting'</i></p> |
| <p>Venue and location (8 responses)</p> | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suitability of venues • Long term meeting venues • Geographically proximate • More affordable • Temperature controlled • Good acoustics, suitable for hearing-impaired men • Equipped with audio-visual technology | <p><i>'A more comfortable meeting place. To date, we have met in the local football/cricket club pavilion which is like a huge barn with poor acoustics, primitive wood stove heating and old uncomfortable seats'</i></p> |



6.3.3 Things OM:NI participants wanted to see less of

Most participants indicated that there was nothing that they wanted to see less of. However, some participants were concerned about the dominance of group conversations by a minority of individuals: *'Important to keep ball rolling and not let one person dominate the floor. Be aware of others that may want to raise issue/topic but may be hesitating. All should feel comfortable.'* Some participants considered that there was inappropriate expression of political or religious ideas and personal biases, too much time was devoted to discussion of participants' health, there was poor selection of discussion topics, discussions were long and rambling, and there was inconsistent attendance at group meetings.

6.3.4 Things OM:NI participants wanted to stay the same

When asked what they wanted to stay the same, a number of participants (11) stated 'everything'. For those participants who provided specific feedback, the majority of responses related to the structure of the OM:NI groups. Participants particularly appreciated the flexibility and informality of the meeting agendas, which allowed for people to share news in a relaxed manner before a specific topic was discussed, as one participant indicated *'The vital first section of a meeting to encourage all participation by members to participate/contribute their thoughts re what they have achieved in the month or fortnight'*. Other things that participants wanted to remain the same included small group numbers, the men only format, varied discussion topics and current meeting times.

Consistent with the social emphasis of OM:NI, participants also wanted to maintain the friendships and camaraderie they had developed within the groups, with one participant stating *'The ability to listen to each other, allowing for others to have different opinions.'*

6.4 Impact of COVID-19 on engagement with OM:NI

When asked how COVID-19 had impacted on their experience with OM:NI, participants reported that many of their OM:NI groups had continued to function throughout the lockdown period in Melbourne, by means of moving to online meeting methods (Zoom, Skype). While participants indicated that this was not their preference for interaction, with face-to-face activities preferred, it had proved a successful method of continuing group activities during this period, as one noted *'Our group continued on Zoom and this worked well. Maintaining our connections on Zoom was a great support getting through all the Melbourne lockdowns'*

However, a small number of participants (2) indicated that they felt abandoned by COTA Victoria during this period, as one participant related *'We went to Zoom - a member initiative - we heard nothing from OMNI or COTA. A member funded a Zoom licence.'*

- While 74% of participants (n=77) indicated that COVID-19 had impacted on their ability to attend their OM:NI group, only 30% suggested that COVID-19 will impact on their motivation to attend in-person OM:NI groups in the future. Some participants expressed concerns in the free text section that participants within their groups had been or were currently fearful to return to face-to-face socialising post COVID-19.
- 61% of participants indicated that COVID-19 had reduced their level of social interaction with other OM:NI participants, and 54% indicated that COVID-19 had reduced their level of enjoyment of OM:NI group activities. For those participants who suggested that COVID-19 had impacted on their experience, this was primarily attributed to the reduced frequency of meetings and lack of routine, a lack of desire or ability to participate via videoconferencing methods (Zoom/Skype) due to unfamiliarity and 'being talked over', and the consequent disengagement of other participants. As one participant related:

'It nearly decimated the group to the extent it was not going to survive. Zoom saved us but halved our member attendance. Quite a few of the members did not have the ability or equipment to zoom or just did not like doing over their phone or tablet. They lost the enjoyment of face-to-face socialising'

6.5 Motivations for future attendance

The majority (88%) of participants (n=75) indicated they were very, or totally, likely to continue in their OM:NI group for the next two years, with the remaining 12% exhibiting some uncertainty about their continued involvement. For those who stated they were unlikely or unsure, this was attributed primarily to a lack of interest, with participants identifying a lack of interest or stimulation, and a desire for more contribution-oriented involvement, as key challenges. Other reasons included a *'lack of emotional language'* within group activities, ageing and ill health, lack of transport and possible relocation.

For those participants who were no longer participating in OM:NI, they had ceased participation due to poor physical or mental health (related to specific conditions and to ageing), interrupted attendance due to COVID-19 and time clashes with other activities or interests.

7 Discussion and Conclusions

7.1 Combined summary of findings

This evaluation has identified, from the perspectives of various stakeholder groups, the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with sustainability of the OM:NI program. In doing so, it provides some targeted evidence to support informed decision-making and planning for the ongoing viability of OM:NI. This concluding section seeks to draw together all stages of the evaluation and present some potential directions for the OM:NI program moving forward.

All stakeholder groups consulted as part of the evaluation – the OM:NI Advisory Committee, the OM:NI group contacts, and the OM:NI participants themselves - value OM:NI

and consider it to be effective in supporting older men. In considering the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats raised by these varied stakeholder groups, two distinct levels of factors were identified:

1. Macro-level factors - inclusive of governance-related and broader issues, and
2. Meso- and micro-level factors - inclusive of operational issues that manifest at the group and individual OM:NI participant level.

Details about these factors are summarised in Table 7. It is relevant to note that the factors interact with each other; that is, factors at a governance level will inevitably have implications at the operational level, and vice-versa.

Table 7: Summary of SWOT analysis - combined stakeholder perspectives

| | Governance factors | Operational factors |
|-------------------|---|---|
| Strengths | <p>Provision of management structure and advice and infrastructure support from COTA Victoria</p> <p>OM:NI groups have direct access to the COTA Victoria board and to senior management</p> <p>COTA Victoria provides public liability insurance to OM:NI groups through registration of group contacts as volunteers</p> | <p>The structure, values, and philosophy of OM:NI facilitate good and respectful discussion and the formation of friendships among OM:NI participants</p> <p>The OM:NI structure is sufficiently adaptable and flexible to enable each group to meet the needs of the men who constitute the group</p> <p>Male-only format</p> <p>Diversity of men from different working backgrounds</p> <p>Emphasis on friendship, social connection, provision of practical and emotional support, and mateship</p> <p>Peer facilitation and leadership</p> <p>Practical, in-kind, and promotional support from OM:NI venues</p> |
| Weaknesses | <p>COTA Victoria has limited financial capacity to support growth and ongoing recruitment of OM:NI participants</p> <p>COTA Victoria is perceived as being slow to respond and lacking in provision of support. Challenges include high staff turnover, low numbers of male staff and Board members, lack of financial and human capital</p> <p>Lack of clear, consistent, two-way communication between COTA Victoria, OAC, and OM:NI groups. Lack of communication about responsibilities, roles, needs, and aspirations of each of these stakeholders</p> <p>Many OM:NI participants are not interested in or unwilling to take action for the growth and development of OM:NI beyond their own local groups</p> | <p>Declining numbers of OM:NI participants and lack of consistent attendance at OM:NI group meetings</p> <p>Lack of cultural diversity of OM:NI participants</p> <p>Some group facilitators lack skill and experience, consequently there is monopolisation of group discussions by some OM:NI participants and there is lack of engaging discussion topics</p> <p>Limited appeal of the OM:NI (Older Men: New Ideas) moniker, for recruiting men aged 55 – 65 years, and for accurately representing OM:NI group activities</p> |

| | Governance factors | Operational factors |
|---------------|---|---|
| Opportunities | <p>Increased development of OAC support structure for group contacts</p> <p>More strategic attention to marketing, promotion and recruitment</p> | <p>Increasing diversity of OM:NI activities, including more opportunities for socialisation and greater diversity in discussion topics</p> <p>Increasing opportunities for shared facilitation, and provision of training and support in group facilitation</p> <p>Splitting large groups; and joining smaller groups together</p> <p>Partnering with local organisations to facilitate growth and recruitment</p> <p>Increasing ethnic diversity</p> <p>Use of videoconferencing to develop new 'virtual' OM:NI groups</p> |
| Threats | <p>Current lack of alignment between the purposes of OM:NI participants, OAC and COTA Victoria for involvement in OM:NI</p> <p>Lack of succession planning for group contacts</p> <p>Reluctance of/inability of OM:NI participants to take on leadership roles due to the bureaucracy and administrative requirements involved in being an OM:NI group contact, and to engage in recruitment and promotion activities</p> | <p>Ageing of current OM:NI cohort</p> <p>Difficulties associated with recruiting new participants at a local level, including competing with other men's activities (e.g., Men's Sheds) for participants and the ongoing impacts of COVID-19</p> <p>Cost and availability of appropriate venues within local communities</p> <p>Poor group facilitation skills, including the ability of group facilitators to manage challenging behaviours</p> <p>Resistance of OM:NI participants to changes in membership, structure and format</p> |

7.2 Value proposition of OM:NI

OM:NI is distinguished from other types of social groups and men's groups by its particular format and structure, and its principles. OM:NI's value proposition appears to be the OM:NI model of group-based conversation, with an emphasis on developing friendships and male fellowship through dialogues underpinned by core values of confidentiality, acceptance, and respect. As identified in the literature review, a key component of engaging men in social group activity is creating openings for them to exhibit their masculinity within a group context; the OM:NI model provides this opportunity for older men who are looking for an alternative to other types of men's groups on offer, such as Men's Sheds. OM:NI provides a secular structure for older men to get together and engage in pleasurable and interesting conversation and sharing ideas. It is a contemporary alternative to gathering around a campfire to relax, chat, share stories, and provide mutual social support.

However, it is also clear that the OM:NI model will not and does not appeal to all older men. The demographic profile of the survey participant group indicated that most of the current OM:NI participants are highly educated, Anglo-Saxon older men from professional backgrounds living in the urban environment of Melbourne suburbs. This profile of

OM:NI men provides some insight into potential marketing strategies. There may be benefit in targeting cohorts of men based on socio-demographic profiling, given that it is known that men who fit the socio-demographic profile are potentially more likely to be attracted by the OM:NI model. (This idea will be discussed in the subsequent section.) However, the current profile of OM:NI participants simultaneously raises questions regarding whether the OM:NI model is unattractive to other cohorts of men, such as men living in rural/regional areas and men from CALD backgrounds, or is it that these groups have not had the same levels of promotion about and opportunity to participate in OM:NI as the current cohort of men? Historically, OM:NI groups were initially started by a project officer living in Melbourne, and from that point they have grown organically. New groups might arise in a neighbouring suburb as an existing OM:NI group grows in numbers of participants and more men living in/around the area become aware of OM:NI. Other groups arise due to a person in that area (an existing OM:NI participant or a community leader) championing the need for a new OM:NI group and promoting OM:NI in the new area. Therefore, although most of the current OM:NI groups operate in Melbourne, this may be due to their being a sufficient population density and historical factors, rather than the OM:NI model not being attractive

to rural men. There is also an alternative theory that rural older men might not find the OM:NI model to be appealing due to high levels of stoicism and self-reliance (40), and fears relating to confidentiality in smaller rural community environments (41). For older CALD participants, participation in group social activities is particularly challenging when activities require a high level of proficiency in spoken English, or where groups are primarily comprised of English speakers (42), which is currently the case within the OM:NI model. However, it may simply be that these groups are not being effectively marketed to CALD cohorts.

7.3 Potential strategies for sustainability

At a base level, participants provided suggestions for both improving and maintaining the value proposition of OM:NI. There is significant scope for stakeholders of OM:NI to meet and complete strategic visioning and planning. The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats identified in this evaluation could provide impetus for these discussions, while considering:

- The resource capacities and desires of the various stakeholder groups,
- A shared vision for the future of OM:NI, and
- The potential timeframes for addressing weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (long term/short term).

However, in promoting sustainability and addressing potential growth for OM:NI, three key areas have been identified that will support continued maintenance of the OM:NI strengths, while responding to some of the weakness, opportunities, and threats identified across the three stakeholder groups.

7.3.1 Clarification of distinct stakeholder needs, roles, responsibilities, and capacities

As identified in this evaluation, each stakeholder group has different needs and different visions and goals for the future of OM:NI. Also highlighted, was a lack of understanding about the value and purpose of OM:NI to COTA Victoria, and the role and governance of the OAC. Thus, a key challenge relating to the ongoing governance of OM:NI, and addressing the growth that is needed for sustainability, is the current lack of clarity about the respective vision, aspirations, needs, roles, and responsibilities of each of the stakeholder groups: COTA Victoria, the OAC, group contacts, and OM:NI participants. Each stakeholder group needs to better understand what the other stakeholder groups need and want from OM:NI and from each other. After developing knowledge of each group's needs and wants, *agreement* about who is responsible for what, and what can be provided by each group (given that all groups have limited resources), is critical for identifying strategies for sustainability and in making plans for further growth.

At the macro-level, there is a need to develop a shared vision about the purpose of OM:NI and what the benefits of OM:NI

are for each stakeholder group. Clarity and agreement are also needed at the operational level. The following questions are important to address:

- How does COTA Victoria define their role in supporting OM:NI? What specific operational support can COTA Victoria provide towards the maintenance, growth, and development of OM:NI, in the context of their current financial, physical, and human capital?
- What should the OAC be responsible for, both from a strategic and operational perspective? How should the OAC be constituted (including appointment of OAC members)? How is representativeness in the OAC addressed, or is this unimportant? What expectations does COTA Victoria have regarding time and other resources OAC members provide? What resources and support do the OAC require from COTA Victoria to fulfil their role and responsibilities?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of group contacts, and what are their relationships with the OAC and with COTA Victoria? What expectations does COTA Victoria have regarding time and other resources group contacts provide? What resources and support do group contacts require from the OAC and from COTA Victoria to fulfil their role and responsibilities? Are group contacts also by default group facilitators, or are these separate roles?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of OM:NI participants? Are there any roles and responsibilities for OM:NI participants to contribute to leadership and operational support of their OM:NI groups, to the larger OM:NI organisation, or to COTA Victoria? What expectations does COTA Victoria have regarding time and other resources OM:NI participants provide? What resources and support do OM:NI participants require from group contacts, from the OAC, and from COTA Victoria to fulfil their role and responsibilities?

Answers to these questions are essential for determining that OM:NI is in sync with COTA Victoria and that each stakeholder group's needs are met. Detailed discussion of these questions will also help identify what sustainability and growth initiatives can be met and matching the strategic objectives to the current resource profile or identifying where additional funding or expertise are needed. (Once more clearly identified, additional requirement could potentially be sought through external grant applications or linking with other organisations). As this evaluation has identified, a weakness of the current OM:NI model is the limited desire and capacity of group contacts and OM:NI participants to engage with bureaucratic organisational structures and to take on leadership roles, which has similarly been observed in other volunteer and community organisational research (43, 44). Therefore, there is a need for clarity in relation to what various stakeholder groups are willing to, and can logistically, provide.

7.3.2 Development and implementation of promotion, recruitment, and growth strategies

The need to recruit new OM:NI participants, as well as a desire to expand the number of OM:NI groups being offered, was identified consistently across all three stakeholder groups that participated in the evaluation. The need for ongoing renewal of OM:NI participants is a very significant impacting factor on the sustainability of OM:NI. Currently, there is no plan or strategy for ongoing recruitment within OM:NI, rather, each group is left to its own devices to determine if, when, and how recruitment of replacement group participants is completed. There is also no clear and agreed plan for growth of OM:NI groups. The literature review identified that local recruitment is a key success factor for men's groups. Localised, personalised recruitment strategies will be particularly important in recruiting participants from minority backgrounds, and from rural locations, where trust is an important factor in attracting men to attend group activities (43, 45).

Consequently, a plan and strategy for promotion of OM:NI, ongoing recruitment of OM:NI participants, and growth of new groups is recommended. Strategies to achieve these aims could include:

- Development of generic OM:NI promotional materials that can be adapted for local contexts. In accordance with best-practice guidelines for recruiting men identified in the literature review, these materials ought to emphasise the strengths and value proposition of OM:NI. In preparing these materials, the suitability of the name "OM:NI" ought to be re-considered, considering its potential unattractiveness to men aged 55-65years. The ageing-related literature notes that older people, particularly the people at the younger end of the spectrum, are often reluctant to attend groups that are marketed to 'older people', despite wanting to engage with this cohort (46, 47).
- If growth is desired, there is benefit in identifying new communities that may most likely contain the type of men that OM:NI is known to appeal to, that is, well-educated (retired) professionals. Census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) could be examined to identify urban and regional communities that have high proportions of highly educated, professional, older men.
- There may be potential to develop specific interest OM:NI groups (e.g. groups targeting specific ethnicities) in particular areas. As the attractiveness of OM:NI groups for specific interest participants is untested, it would be prudent to start with one 'test' group prior to committing significant resources to this approach.
- It would be worthwhile to trial an online OM:NI group, which in the first instance could draw from existing OM:NI participants. There is likely to be a cohort of current OM:NI participants who are not currently attending their usual OM:NI group due to wanting to reduce their potential exposure to the COVID-19 virus, or due to illness (or other circumstances) they find it

difficult to regularly attend their local group meetings. If the online meeting is successful, it could be expanded to attract participants who are new to OM:NI. An online OM:NI group would need tailoring to suit the online environment (e.g. a smaller group size, a skilled online facilitator, a shorter length of meeting time). There is expertise in conducting online groups among the current cohort of group facilitators, as a few OM:NI groups met online by video-conference over the past few years due to the impact of COVID-19.

- (As per the previous sub-section) identifying the operational roles and responsibilities of COTA Victoria, the OAC, group contacts, and OM:NI participants for promotion and recruitment for both new and existing groups. Factors to consider include responsibilities for maintaining websites, updating and maintaining group contact details, local community recruitment strategies, and promotion at state, regional, and local events.

It is recommended that recruitment and growth strategies should involve emplacement of OM:NI groups within existing local health, community, and social structures. It is anticipated that by 'partnering' with local organisations, potential challenges to recruitment and the ongoing logistical requirements for group meetings such as promotion in the local area, venue hire, resource support, and assistance with governance might be offset. Local organisations that may be interested in such an arrangement could include community health centres, positive ageing or health and wellbeing teams within councils, multicultural organisations, neighbourhood houses, University of the Third Age, and Men's Sheds. These organisations may be willing to:

1. Situate OM:NI groups under their governance umbrella (and in doing so, provide ongoing promotion and resource support, insurance and governance assistance); or
2. Provide local endorsement for the OM:NI groups, by means of more targeted assistance with promotion; and/or
3. Provide practical resources such as free/low-cost access to meeting venues

The first option, if implemented, may potentially support COTA Victoria to move to a more strategic level of support, in terms of simply providing ongoing networking, training, and support for OM:NI group facilitators in relation to the OM:NI model, and in redeveloping centralised promotional materials. Regardless of whether this emplacement occurs, a detailed promotion and recruitment strategy for state, regional, and local conditions should be developed. The details ought to include who is responsible for enacting the strategy and how often.

In light of the growing popularity of social prescribing for social isolation and loneliness, local general practitioner (GP) networks should also be considered as a key site for recruitment (48). For engagement of CALD older men, engagement with local ethnic groups and organisations,

religious organisations, and multicultural organisations will also be critical, and significant relationship building with these organisations will be required to reinforce trust. Similarly, in recruiting older rural men, working through trusted rural community assets that older men engage with (e.g. Men's Sheds, Country Fire Authority, Rotary Clubs, local agricultural committees) will be vital to legitimising OM:NI in the rural/regional setting.

7.3.3 Increased communication with, and support and training for OM:NI group contacts

Group contacts and facilitators are a key pillar of success for sustainability of OM:NI, as they are responsible for the day-to-day operations of the OM:NI groups. However, this evaluation has identified that group contacts and facilitators experience some challenges in their roles, including increasing levels of administration and bureaucracy, lack of clarity about roles, responsibilities, and governance procedures, and issues relating to succession planning. Therefore, a more structured approach to supporting OM:NI group contacts and facilitators may be of benefit, inclusive of:

- An induction and/or induction materials that outline the vision and scope of OM:NI operations, governance structure and processes, roles and responsibilities, and clear procedural instructions (e.g. who needs a police check and why a police check is needed, how to get a police check, schedule of representatives' meetings, who to contact if a challenge or difficulty arises, the OM:NI group structure, record-keeping requirements). The existing OM:NI manual could be updated and/or added to as part of these induction materials.
- Identification of a dedicated and ongoing support person at COTA Victoria who can provide assistance with administrative and bureaucratic requirements
- Identification of the member of the OAC who is the liaison for the OM:NI group
- Provision of the promotion, recruitment, and growth policy that includes expectations of group contacts/facilitators, provision of recruitment materials, and instructions to support local recruitment
- Provision of learning and development opportunities, such as facilitation training, how to manage difficult situations and dominating personalities. These could be one-off, stand-alone occasions and/or an ongoing aspect of the representatives' meetings.

- Representatives' meetings ought to be made more accessible to support attendance by all group contacts and/or more detailed information about the content of these meetings should be provided. Some possibilities include, holding meetings online by videoconferencing, holding "regional" meetings, videorecording meetings, providing teleconferencing, providing detailed meeting agendas in advance of meetings and allowing attendees to submit reports, questions, or commentaries, and providing detailed minutes.
- Provision of a succession planning policy, including strategies and support for enacting the policy.

A key component of developing support will be identifying areas where the administrative load and recruitment responsibilities for group contacts/facilitators may be lightened. As referenced in the previous section, increased partnership with existing local health, government, and community organisations may assist in this regard. In terms of succession planning, an explicit policy that details the need for succession planning, limits on the "term of office", support from experienced group contacts/facilitators, and strategies for regularly addressing succession planning (e.g. annual review for each OM:NI group), could be valuable.

In summary, the OM:NI model is of significant value to the older men who are currently OM:NI participants. The overarching structure and format of OM:NI should be maintained, as it is an essential aspect of the unique value proposition of OM:NI. Opportunity for socialisation and adherence to OM:NI principles are also critical to OM:NI's success. To ensure OM:NI's sustainability, strategic attention to localised promotion and recruitment through linkages with local organisations is recommended. More support and training for group contacts and facilitators would also be of value. Underpinning these factors, however, is a need for all parties who have a stake in OM:NI to work together and agree upon a shared vision for OM:NI, and how this vision can be realistically operationalised. In light of the global challenges associated with the administration and leadership of volunteer-led groups for older people (43), clear direction in relation to governance and administration is critical for ensuring that groups such as OM:NI can continue to support the social and emotional needs of older men.

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