

Friendship on the menu as 50 seniors gather for first social lunch

A new initiative bringing Portland seniors together over good food, conversation and friendship is already proving a success, with more than 50 people attending the second *Sizzle & Socialise* gathering hosted by Portland Senior Citizens.

Funded through United Way Glenelg's Lewis Court Fund, established to support older people to become more active and engaged in their community, the initiative provides a free social lunch every two months, creating opportunities for older residents to connect, strengthen friendships and enjoy each other's company.

One of the most encouraging outcomes has been the opportunity to bring together the three different groups within Portland Senior Citizens; indoor bowls, cards and pantry bingo, for a shared social occasion.

While members regularly participate in their individual activities, the social lunches provide an opportunity for everyone to come together, build new friendships and strengthen their sense of belonging.

The success of the initiative comes amid growing concern about loneliness and social isolation, particularly in regional and rural communities. Research from Ending Loneliness Together's 2023 State of the Nation report found that 35 per cent of rural Australians experienced loneliness, compared with 30 per cent of metropolitan residents.

The issue is particularly relevant in the Glenelg Shire, where more than one in four residents are aged 65 or over, according to the 2021 Census.

United Way Glenelg Executive Officer Nicole Carr said the strong attendance at the second gathering highlighted the importance of investing in opportunities for social connection.

"More than 50 people coming together for a shared meal is a wonderful result, particularly when the original expectation was around 40 participants," Ms Carr said.

"What makes this initiative so valuable is its simplicity. It's not about organising something elaborate. It's about bringing people together, sharing a meal, having a conversation and giving people something to look forward to.

"Loneliness is a significant issue in our communities, and social connection is just as important to healthy ageing as physical health."

Ms Carr said the initiative also demonstrated the important role local community organisations play in supporting the wellbeing of older residents.

"Portland Senior Citizens already provides opportunities for people to stay active through bowls, cards and bingo. This project takes that a step further by bringing everyone together, regardless of which activity they usually attend.

"Sometimes the greatest community impact comes from the simplest ideas. A shared lunch, a friendly face and a welcoming environment can make a real difference to someone's week."

The Sizzle & Socialise lunches will be held every two months, with volunteers assisting in preparing meals, serving food and welcoming participants.

The next gathering will be a special Christmas lunch on Wednesday 9 December, with employees from the Port of Portland generously volunteering their time to serve meals and assist with the clean-up. Their support will give older residents the opportunity to sit back, enjoy the festive celebrations and, most importantly, spend quality time in each other's company.

Ms Carr said the project reflected the purpose of the Lewis Court Fund, which supports initiatives that encourage older people to remain active, socially connected and involved in their communities.

"With an ageing population across the Glenelg Shire, initiatives like this are becoming increasingly important.

"We're delighted to support Portland Senior Citizens in creating opportunities that strengthen friendships, build community connections and remind our older residents that they are valued and belong."

In addition to the social lunches, Portland Senior Citizens offers regular activities for older residents looking to stay active, meet new people and enjoy some friendly company.

- **Indoor Bowls:** Saturdays and Mondays at 12.15 pm
- **Cards:** Tuesdays and Thursdays at 1.45 pm
- **Pantry Bingo:** Friday 12.15 pm

Whether you're interested in playing bowls, enjoying a game of cards, trying your luck at pantry bingo or simply meeting new people, Portland Senior Citizens offers a welcoming environment where friendships can grow.

Photo: Senior Maree Jennings excited to be part of the senior's group providing the lunches.

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