Healthy Eating Advisory Service

Early childhood services

Cooks Connect Toolkit

Building the capacity of Victorian health promoters to support long day care services in meeting Victorian Government Menu planning guidelines for long day care

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Table of Contents

Cooks Connect Toolkit

Healthy Eating Advisory Service

What is a cooks network? 3
Why are cooks so important? 3
What is the purpose of a cooks network? 3
What are the benefits of a cooks network? 3

Step 1. Plan 4
Identify a purpose 4
Seek support 4
Get to know your audience 4
Choose a session format 5
Plan the session 6
Professional development 7

Step 2. Promote 7
Recruitment 7
Promotion 9
Incentivisation 9

Step 3. Implement 11
Preparing for your session 11
Setting the agenda 11
Facilitation 11

Step 4. Evaluate 12
Feedback 12
Evaluation 13

Step 5. Maintain 13
Sustainability and maintenance 13
Supporting Documents 16
Acknowledgements 18

What is a cooks network?

A cooks network is a collaborative community of cooks that meet regularly to network, share knowledge and develop their skills. The network is typically facilitated by health promotion officers (HPOs), bringing together cooks in their local area.

Why are cooks so important?

A long day care cook carries the responsibility of providing nutritious food for children through key developmental stages in growth, learning, health and wellbeing. On average, a child attending long day care spends 31 hours (4 days) a week in care and will consume around 50-70% of their daily food intake. Cooks across Victoria often feel undervalued and unsupported in their role. For cooks to do their best work, it is essential that they are trained, supported and, acknowledged.

What is the purpose of a cooks network?

The purpose of a cooks network is to provide a supportive environment to build the confidence and capacity of cooks working in long day care services (LDCs) to plan a menu to meet the Menu planning guidelines for long day care (MPGs) using a whole service approach.

What is the purpose of a cooks network?

An efficient and effective way for HPOs to engage with long day care services and support cooks to receive professional development and meet the MPGs:

- Efficiency of capacity building
- Networking opportunities
- Peer knowledge sharing
- Healthy Eating Advisory Service (HEAS) support and resources

See Document 1: Benefits of a cooks network for key stakeholders

Tip!
A whole service approach means every aspect of life at a long day care service considers healthy eating:

- Policies and practices
- Curriculum activities
- Menu planning
- Professional development
- Staff and community
- Culture and celebrations

“The cooks network has been a great strategy to prompt healthy menu changes and a less overwhelming starting point for early learning centres to refresh their menus”

Elise Tulloch, Health Promotion Officer, Latrobe Community Health Service (Morwell).

Step 1. Plan

Identify a purpose

To build a successful network, we strongly recommend identifying a key purpose and objectives at the planning stage. This will help you maintain your focus and momentum.

HPOs from Caulfield Community Health Service and Better Health Network (formerly Central Bayside Community Health Services) joined forces to have greater reach and participation of cooks in their network, as well as shared administration duties, facilities, and resources.

Seek support

- Gain support from your management to start a cooks network. Prepare a list of benefits to support your request. Refer to Document 1 for a detailed list of benefits per stakeholder.
- Consider collaboration opportunities with other health promoters working nearby to build a network together.

Tip!

Consider developing a Project plan that describes the overall vision for the network and how it links with government guidelines and your organisational action plans.

Complement this with a Terms of Reference document that describes the roles and responsibilities that HPOs and participants must agree to as members of the network.

Get to know your audience

- Identify how many long day care services are in your area?
- Identify the cultural diversity of the cooks and also the communities they serve and how this may influence the way your run your network.
- Create a participation survey to collect information about what cooks/LDCs in your area want from a cooks network. When the network is aligned with cooks needs you can improve engagement and attendance. Use our sample Participation Survey questions and your choice of survey tool.

Tip!

Find an up-to-date list of approved Early Childhood Service providers on the ACECQA website.

Choose a session format

Using the results from your survey, decide on the best session format.

Format	Pros	Cons
Face-to-face	Increased engagement Increased peer networking	Increased time commitment Venue/ equipment hire Initial recruitment more challenging
Online	Accessibility Simpler facilitation Affordability Less barriers to management support	Reduced participant interaction Reduced peer connection
Hybrid	Flexibility	Difficult to facilitate Unequal participation Increased technical requirements

Face to face sessions

Historically, face to face sessions build greater rapport between cooks and lead to greater participation. Cooks can learn, share and collaborate more easily. However, the requirement to travel can act as an initial deterrent. Find a venue that has the following:

- A central location
- A private meeting room with chairs, tables, audio-visual equipment for showing videos or presentations
- Microphone for presenter (if required)
- Tea and coffee facilities
- Toilets
- Car parking
- Wi-Fi access
- Free or low-cost room hire

Venue options may include, your community health centre, town hall, council building, community hub or a long day care service could host and showcase their facility (if practical).

Online sessions

Online sessions are more accessible to cooks as there is no need to travel.

Find easily accessible platforms to:

- Host the meeting, such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom or Webex.
- Share resources, such as Teams folder, Dropbox, email, Facebook group or an online portal. Programs you can use to create and host your online portal include Synology C2 or Notion.

Tip!

Consider hosting occasional or annual face-to-face sessions as a special event to boost member engagement.

Hybrid sessions

Offer a simultaneous online and face-to-face session providing flexibility to meet a variety of member needs. To provide the best possible experience for all participants:

- Follow recommendations for both face-to-face and online formats.
- Ensure online participants can see and hear the face-toface group and presenter as well as any visual presentation.
- Ensure the face-to-face group can also see and hear the online participants, the presenter and any visual material. This may require the following equipment:
  - Projector or large screen
  - Laptop with camera for presenter and presentation, connected to display screen
  - Microphone and webcam for group interaction
- If there are handouts, ensure a digital version is also available and shared with online members.

Tip!

To ensure online and face-to-face members can participate equally it is vital to test your set-up before the first session.

Plan the session

Planning your first few sessions in advance ensures you have enough time to prepare and promote the sessions to your network.

Plan topics

- Use your Participation survey results to help you.

Research potential presenters for professional development topics. E.g. A paediatric dietitian, a cook with advanced healthy eating implementation knowledge.

Ideas to include in the session:

- Live presenters
- Recorded presentations/instructional videos
- Printed handouts.
- Props or food samples (for face-to-face sessions)
- For online sessions we recommend introducing interactive elements such as breakout rooms or websites such as Mentimeter, Slido, or Padlet to boost participation

Plan your agenda - See Setting the agenda.
How did it go? - Check out Evaluation for more information.

Professional development

Professional development is of interest to many cooks working in long day care. Many begin their career with almost no training or qualification and have limited capacity to extend their learning during their workday. Although it will vary by cohort, the following topics have been identified by existing networks as popular areas of interest for professional development.

Highest priority topics in most cohorts

1. Menu planning guidelines for long day care
2. FoodChecker training
3. Fussy eating
4. Managing allergies and intolerances, including recipe modification and allergy friendly recipes

Other popular topics of interest

- How to read food labels
- Recipe sharing and ideas (in alignment with meeting the MPGs)
- Budget tips – plan a healthy menu on a tight budget
- Promoting Indigenous culture in food (Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander led)
- Reducing food waste and environmental sustainability
- General healthy eating and nutrition for children (facilitated by a dietitian)
- How to use modelling and positive language to support positive eating behaviours
- How to establish and implement positive mealtime environments
- Communicating with parents, childcare workers, and management
- Healthy ingredient swaps
- Strategies and activities for cooking with children
- How to advocate to management for resourcing, budget and professional development

Step 2. Promote

Recruitment

Call, email and/or visit long day care services in your area to gauge interest for your network. Recruitment is most effective when conducted in-person and can take time. It is often achieved in two stages:

- Gain management support
- Establish direct communication with cook

Implementing changes takes a whole of service approach and it is critical that management are onboard.

Centre managers are often the one to decide if the cook can attend within work hours and/or in a paid capacity. It may be particularly challenging to recruit for a face-to-face session, so allow plenty of time to build a connection with each individual service and the key staff involved.

You may also find many cooks don't have an employee email address or phone number and you must rely on the manager to pass-on communications until you establish a direct line of communication with the cook.

Tip!

Pre-plan your conversation with management to clearly explain why it is beneficial for them, their cook, and their centre for the cooks to attend.

The following recruitment activities are recommended by existing networks:

Tick	Recruitment activity checklist
	Engage management early so they have time to prepare staffing appropriately.
	Organise a face-to-face visit to each centre • to hand-deliver a paper invitation (see Promotion for template) • to establish a friendly relationship with management • to promote the network directly to the cook
	Establish a direct line of communication with the cook/s (direct phone or email details if possible)
	Email or post an invitation at least 4 weeks prior to individual cooks or centre directors.
	Invite centres and key staff to join your communication channels to receive future promotional nudges to join your network. See Promotion for additional suggestions.
	Inform centres and key staff of any available incentives you are offering to new members. See Incentivisation for ideas.
	Invite centre management to attend the first network session to validate the value for the cook
	Send a follow up invitation 2 weeks prior to event
	Send a final reminder invitation 1 week prior to event
	Send out confirmation and agenda 3 days in advance, including an online meeting link and related resources (if required)
	Send one last reminder on the day of the event

Promotion

Before launch

Use a combination of the following strategies to promote your new network and boost registrations:

- Develop an engaging invitation promoting the network (or use our Supporter Kit)
- Notify HEAS of your cooks network to promote on our website
- Use existing communication channels such as social media platforms, local Facebook groups, mailing lists, your organisations newsletter or local council newsletters.
- Enlist the help of long day care large providers and franchises to promote to other sites in your jurisdiction
- Consider using incentivisation strategies. See incentivisation for suggestions.

Use our HEAS branded templates to lend additional credibility to the network.
- **Supporter Kit**
- **Certificate of Attendance**

Ongiong promotion

Maintain a steady stream of new registrations to your network by:

- Sending monthly email updates in-between meetings to promote the network or share positive feedback.
- Use existing communication channels to share resources or meeting agendas.
- Ask HEAS to promote your success stories.

Tip!

Develop a member induction process to ensure every new member starts with the same basic information no matter when they join, including:

- Complete a registration form
- Agree to the Terms of Reference
- Access resources
- Offer 1:1 meeting with an HPO

Incentivisation

You may need to provide additional encouragement to motivate cooks (and their managers) to join your network. Consider adopting one or more of the following strategies:

Acknowledgement

Cooks work hard to provide a nourishing menu to the children in their care and they often feel underappreciated in their role. It is important to make the cooks feel valued and acknowledged. Acknowledgements could include:

- verbally during an initial conversation
- in writing an introductory email
- publicly in a newsletter or social media post

Professional development

Promote the professional development opportunities available as part of your network, including access to HEAS' Mini-Professional Development sessions and certificates of completion. See professional development for ideas and inspiration.

Resources

The HEAS website is extremely useful, consider collating existing HEAS resources such as recipes, sample menus and ingredient quantity guides into a "welcome pack."

Subject matter expertise

Inviting a "special guest" such as a dietitian or exemplar cook can incentivise cooks. A dietitian can provide expert guidance that can help cooks to feel more confident in making changes. Contact HEAS to request one of our dietitians speak at your session (limited availability).

Success story

In the past, EACH cook's network have used 'special guests' to boost participation in their network session. Promoting indigenous culture through cooking engaged participants from 23 services. Guest presenters included a cultural consultant, an Aboriginal HPO and a HEAS dietitian. Read more here!

Awards and prizes

- Recipe competition (prize: compilation of submitted recipes)
- Milestone rewards such as; complete a FoodChecker report (prize: shopping voucher to boost fresh food budget)
- Other sought-after prizes you can buy cheaply or develop yourself:
  - kitchen appliances and tools (such as an apple slinky machine, kid-safe knives, storage containers for the pantry, whisk, bowls, mixing spoons, trays)
  - food-related curriculum resources or toys
  - recipe book
  - topical webinar or resources e.g. how to start a herb garden
  - case study write up
  - menu planning whiteboard for the kitchen, with a weekly food group checklist to assisting menu planning in alignment with the guidelines
  - seedlings or a vegetable growing starter kit

Certificates

Certificates (for attendance, achievements, or professional development) are incentivising for both cooks and the centre directors. Download HEAS' editable Certificate of Attendance.

Remuneration

Support cooks to get paid to attend a network session by advocating to their management. Highlight the many benefits to the cooks and LDC. Is there any incentive you can offer cooks within your budget?

Success story

The Monash Health Cooks network found one of the main barriers for cooks to attend a network is getting the time during their work day and being able to get paid for attending. They provide cooks with attendance certificates, describing the topics covered in the session, so they can show their director and get paid for their time.

Step 3. Implement

Preparing for your session

For a face-to-face session:

- Make name tags for attendees.
- Create an attendance sheet (bring pens) to collect contact details for ongoing communication in-between sessions.
- Print photo/video consent forms and feedback forms
- Print any resources to be shared or discussed throughout the session.
- Print activity sheets, attendance certificates or professional development certificates.
- Prepare any props or samples to be used in the session.

For online or hybrid sessions:

- Prepare and share resources electronically in advance, so they are easily accessible during the session.

Setting the agenda

Cooks networks tend to go for around 1 -2 hours. Cooks typically find the peer-to-peer knowledge the most valuable element, so allow time for this. See Document 2 for more detailed session schedule/agenda template.

Example agenda

- Introductions and acknowledgements (5-10 minutes)
- Ice breaker or activity (10-15 minutes)
- Presentation or activity for professional development topic (15 – 30 minutes)
- Discussion time (20 – 30 minutes)
- Close (5 – 10 minutes)

Facilitation

Recommended steps

Well facilitated sessions ensure cooks are engaged throughout the session and keep returning.

- Introduce yourself, purpose of the network, and agenda for the session.
- Provide an Acknowledgement of Country
- Announce any general housekeeping relevant to your venue (face-to-face or online)
- Seek consent for recording the session and/or taking photos.
- Discuss group etiquette to encourage equitable participation:
  - For a face-to-face session, ask cooks to raise their hand with questions or contributions and respectfully listen to others.
  - For an online session, request all members turn on their cameras, mute their microphone when not talking to minimise background noise and use the “hands up” function to talk if you have a larger group.
- Ask cooks to introduce themselves, name, role and organisation.
- Icebreaker activity. This is an essential step to help new members feel comfortable. See Document 3 for a list icebreaker activities.
- Encourage participation. It can take a while for new members to feel comfortable participating, especially when there is a language barrier. When required:
  - Proactively prompt responses.
  - Ask specific individuals for questions or feedback.
  - Be mindful of participants from a CALD background, use inclusive, plain English and allow enough time for responses.
  - Have some pre-prepared open-ended questions ready to go, e.g., how do you overcome fussy eating in your service? What are the most popular recipes at your centre?
  - For online sessions: Invite typed responses in the chat box if no one is responding. Use the typed responses to generate further discussion.
  - For hybrid sessions: Keep online attendees engaged by directing specific questions to those online, monitoring the chat box and periodically checking in to see if online attendees have anything they would like to add or ask.

The first session

The first session is a good time to openly discuss the purpose and objectives for the network. This results in a more engaged network who have a vested interest in attending.

After the session

Include the below information in a follow up email to all participants, including those unable to make it:

- Thank you for coming or registering interest
- Session summary and minutes
- Recap of any resources shared
- Call to action or reminder of homework
- Feedback survey. See below for sample surveys.

Step 4. Evaluate

Feedback

It is important to gather regular feedback on your network. This can help your network: increase registrations, maintain engagement and ensure the professional growth of your members.

Short surveys are an easy way to collect anonymous feedback about the network or the professional development sessions. Visit the HEAS website for 2 feedback surveys:

- Cooks Connect Satisfaction Survey (general)
- Cooks Connect Professional Development Survey (specific)

To avoid survey fatigue, feedback can be collected verbally at the end of each session to inform improvements for future events. Keep in mind, some participants may not be comfortable to share their views in front of others and prefer an anonymous survey.

Tip!

Allow time to collect feedback or complete surveys within the session to boost completion rates. Check out free online survey tools like Survey Monkey, Lime, Menti, MailChimp or Microsoft forms.

You may experience higher completion rates if the survey is printed and completed manually rather than online.

Evaluation

To quantify and demonstrate the contribution of your network towards meeting the requirements of your healthy eating priority area, it is critical to set up formal evaluation measures from the beginning.

Benefits include:

- Providing data for reporting
- Identifying opportunities for improvement
- Promoting successful outcomes to future members and their managers
- Assessing activities and learnings against the purpose and objectives

Selecting an appropriate evaluation method will depend on your networks purpose and objectives.

Tip!

Avoid overwhelming members with too many surveys.

Consider a comprehensive evaluation survey only once per year to measure outcomes and assist goal setting and planning.

Cooks Connect Evaluation Tool

Annual evaluation

An annual evaluation is more comprehensive than a feedback survey and may combine survey data and professional development feedback from the year. Annual evaluations also assess how the network is tracking against the original objectives, including the attendance rates and outcomes. If you don't have evaluation guidelines within your organisation, see our sample Evaluation Tool.

Step 5. Maintain

Sustainability and maintenance

To maintain group momentum, especially as some cooks become more experienced compared to newer members, ensure the network is still meeting their needs. Existing networks use some of the following strategies:

- Link to recognition or award programs such as the Achievement Program or Smiles 4 Miles. With increased confidence from attending a network, cooks and centres may feel more comfortable to seek recognition.
- Establish competitions and awards within your network to provide additional acknowledgement.
- Establish network champions to take greater responsibility for the success of the network e.g., facilitate sections of the agenda or assist in planning sessions.
- Establish a mentoring model for more experienced members to support newer members.
- Invite cooks to showcase their achievements with a short presentation.
- Develop a case study of a particular cook or LDC to promote in social media or via HEAS communication channels.
- Nominate cooks for a local ECEC sector award.
- Organise a site visit to an exemplar LDC to showcase inspirational practices.
- Review the network purpose and objectives annually to ensure they still meet member needs.
- Review the format annually to ensure the model is still appropriate. Try a face-to- session if you have only offered online sessions.

Tip!

As the network matures, evidence demonstrates that a gradual transition from a heavily facilitated approach by the HPO towards a collaborative model is effective at sustaining engagement. This transition acknowledges the skills and capabilities of more experienced cooks and can be achieved by:

- Supporting the group to nominate senior roles within the network
- Engaging cooks in planning sessions and agenda items

HPOs still play a critical role ensuring PD is evidence-based and aligns with government guidelines.

Supporting documents

Document 1: Benefits of a cooks network for key stakeholders

Health Promoters

Aligns with the Community Health - Health Promotion guidelines and your reporting requirements.

- Speeds up the implementation of healthy food and drink supply policies in accordance with Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2023-2027.
- Helps you implement evidence-based programs and initiatives supporting healthier and more sustainable food environments:
  - Victorian Government Menu planning guidelines for long day care
  - Achievement Program's Healthy Eating and Oral Health benchmark
  - Dental Health Services Victoria's Smiles 4 Miles award
  - Quality Area 2 of the National Quality Standards, Element 2.1.3 'healthy eating and physical activity are promoted and appropriate for each child'.
- Supports you to encourage engagement and uptake of healthy eating initiatives within the community.
- Provides you with the opportunity to engage with cooks from multiple centres at once, making it simpler to share resources and help to implement healthy eating practices.
- By enabling cooks to provide nutritious food for all children in long day care, this helps to provide equity and food security across the community, which is especially important for priority groups.
- Helps you with your reporting requirements by providing data collection opportunities.

Greater reach, engagement and efficiency in supporting long day care services

- By bringing cooks together, you can support multiple long day care services to meet the menu planning guidelines.
- The long day care cooks will likely be more inspired to provide healthy eating environments after they've engaged with fellow cooks.
- You can support multiple cooks in one session, which saves you time.
- The expertise of experienced cooks can be shared through peer-to-peer learning.
- Provides you with the opportunity to learn about the barriers which cooks face, and any helpful tips which they can share with the group.
- Support participating services to meet the Achievement Program's Healthy Eating and Oral Health benchmark or achieve their Smiles 4 Miles award.

Access to credible resources and support

- Access to HEAS' resources and guidance to support you in setting up and running a cooks network.
- Access to HEAS' professional development materials to educate cooks on relevant topics.
- Certificates of acknowledgement to celebrate cooks who implement healthy eating practices.
- Access to Victorian Government, National Nutrition Foundation and HEAS branded promotional collateral (Supporter Kit) to lend credibility to the network and increase support from management.
- Opportunities for a HEAS dietitian to attend as a guest-speaker (subject to availability).
- Opportunities to join a HEAS-led CoP for health promoters.

Advocate for food systems change

- Opportunity to advocate to long day care management for healthier food environments by promoting the network and supporting cooks' professional development.
- Advocate for and elevate the role of the cook in long day care by providing certificates of attendance and completed professional development topics they can display in their organisation.

Cooks/chefs

As an HPO, use these benefits to inform and support your advocacy and engagement efforts:

Opportunity to network with other cooks to foster collaboration and sense of community.

- Provides a supportive and safe environment for cooks to share knowledge and experiences with each other.
- Opportunity to problem solve and learn from others with similar challenges or experiences.
- Opportunity to build confidence to better advocate for nutrition, their needs and the importance of their role in the organisation.

Access to professional development opportunities.

- Increase their knowledge and skills in providing healthy menus to overcome common challenges, such as managing fussy eating and allergies.
- Opportunity to engage directly with health or nutrition professionals, such as HPOs or dietitians.
- Access to resources and advice, to support them to meet the menu planning guidelines.

LDC management and centre directors

Free professional development for cooks, providing enhanced knowledge, competency, and efficiency in role.

- Potential for improved staff retention and reduced turnover.

Access to new resources, information, and skills to contribute to quality improvement in the centre.

- Provides evidence to support QIP reporting under NQS quality area 2.1.3 via meeting the MPGs.

Document 2 – Example session schedule

Cooks network session agenda	Time
Introductions and acknowledgements • Introduce yourself and the network session • Outline the agenda for the session • Acknowledgement of Country • Network member introductions	**5 - 10 minutes**
Ice breaker or activity • Establish rapport among members and generate group interactions. See Document 3 for ideas.	**10 - 15 minutes**
Professional development • Presentation or activity on key topic	**15 - 30 minutes**
Discussion time • This is the part of a cooks network that cooks value the most, especially during in-person sessions. • Facilitate questions with the presenter • Encourage and facilitate peer-to-peer knowledge and experience sharing to solve challenges and share ideas	**20 - 30 minutes**
Close • Summary of session and key learning outcomes • Final announcements or updates • Provide a call to action or homework before next session. • Remind about the next session details such as date, time, and topic. • Remind cooks about support available between sessions. • Seek feedback. See Evaluation for survey templates.	**5 - 10 minutes**

Document 3: Icebreaker activities

Ask members to take turns answering a question (You respond first to role-model an answer)

- If you were a vegetable, what would you be and why?
- What is your favourite food or your least favourite food and why?
- What is your favourite cuisine, and what about it do you like more than others?
- Name a food that reminds you of your childhood and explain why.
- Which food best represents your culture or family?

Using your senses

Bring food samples for the cooks to try. Ask cooks to use their senses to describe food (eg. look, feel, sound, smell, taste). This is a good activity before a fussy eating session as it shows how encouraging children to explore foods with their senses is a helpful strategy with new foods. Use more divisive fruit, vegetables or herbs that may evoke a variety of responses e.g. coriander.

“This or that” quick fire questions

A fun little ‘getting to know you’ activity. Ask each person in the group a few ‘quick fire’ questions where they have to choose “this or that” between different foods and drinks.

- Coffee or tea?
- Pizza or pasta?
- Sweet or savoury?
- Brussel sprouts or broccoli?

Food quiz

Plan food related trivia questions and read them to the group. The cooks write down their answers then go through the correct answers together at the end. Some fun questions could include:

- Name the only fruit with its seeds on the outside (answer: strawberries)
- What does the ‘Scoville scale’ measure? (answer: the spiciness or heat of chillies)
- What staple of Korean cuisine is made from salted and fermented vegetables? The most common ingredients are cabbage and Korean radishes. (answer: kimchi)

Acknowledgements

This toolkit was developed using a co-design approach with cooks and health promoters involved in cooks networks across Victoria. The advice offered is based on the lived experiences of these generous contributors. We would like to thank everyone who contributed their valuable time and insights to the development of this toolkit, including:

- Hannah Bussell, Student Dietitian, Deakin University
- Taylor Leeson, Student Dietitian, Deakin University
- Ella Ciardulli, Health Promotion Officer, Caulfield Community Health Service
- Kayla Di Maio, Health Promotion Officer, Better Health Network
- Elise Tulloch, Health Promotion Officer, Latrobe Community Health Service
- Lorraine Col-long, Childcare Chef, EACH Child Ringwood East
- Kim Clancy, Cook, Bambini ELC Newtowk
- Tegan Laird, Kitchen Coordinator, City of Kingston
- Belinda Hogg, Health Promotion Practitioner, Pakenham Health Centre, Monash Health
- Catherine Delaney, Health Promotion Officer, Eastern Access Community Health (EACH)
- Rachel Cavanagh, Population Health Officer, EACH

Healthy Eating Advisory Service

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