



CONNECT UP 2617

BUILDING LOCAL SOCIAL CONNECTION
FOR 18-30s IN BELCONNEN AND BRUCE

EVALUATION REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Authors: Dr Barbara Walsh, Sonya Sandham, Professor Rachel Davey



UNIVERSITY OF
CANBERRA

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March 2026

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Connect Up 2617 acknowledges the contribution of the HRI Project Team:

- Professor Rachel Davey – Study Chief Investigator
- Dr Barbara Walsh – Project Lead
- Dr Cathy Hope – Place Activation and Community Engagement
- Sonya Sandham – Communication Officer
- Britt Nichols – Designer
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Connect Up 2617 acknowledges the Ngunnawal people, the Traditional Custodians of the country on which we work and live, and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures, and to Elders both past and present.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OVERVIEW

Connect Up 2617 was a groundbreaking pilot project addressing loneliness and social isolation by building capacity for social connection among those aged 18-30s in the Canberra suburbs of Belconnen and Bruce. Delivered by the University of Canberra’s Health Research Institute (HRI) between March 2024 and October 2025, the project successfully demonstrated that a socioecological approach through community-based, peer-led approaches can significantly reduce loneliness and strengthen social connection among young adults.

“... before when I was not into social things, I felt like, yeah, ... it doesn’t matter if I won’t be social. It doesn’t matter. I can live by myself. I can have my own food. I can cook everything. I can live my life. But when I started becoming social, I think it impacts my life even more. I started loving my life.”

THE CHALLENGE

Loneliness and social isolation represent significant public health challenges globally, with profound implications for mental and physical wellbeing. The World Health Organisation now recognises social health as equally vital to mental and physical health, elevating social connection to a global policy priority. Despite this recognition, there remains limited research into effective interventions, particularly those employing community-based or socioecological approaches to strengthening social connection.

In Australia, adults aged 18-30s are among the loneliest cohorts. The 2023 Living Well in the ACT Region Survey¹ revealed that 13.6% of 18-29 year olds and 11.2% of 30-40 year olds reported experiencing loneliness – rates significantly higher than other age groups. This alarming trend has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and reflects broader societal changes affecting how young people form and maintain social connections during critical life transitions.

The suburbs of Bruce and Belconnen were selected as sites for this pilot based on their demographic profiles. These suburbs have high proportions of 18-30 year olds (44% in Belconnen and 41% in Bruce, compared to just 16% ACT-wide), are culturally diverse (with 45.8% of Belconnen households and 34% of Bruce households speaking a non-English language at home²), and feature predominantly high-density single occupancy housing. Despite the presence of some “social infrastructure” – such as a public library, educational institutions, a community centre, green spaces, etc – consultation revealed significant barriers to social connection for young residents in these areas.

THE APPROACH

Connect Up 2617 was based on the premise that loneliness is not merely an individual problem requiring a focus on individual behaviour, but rather a broader community issue demanding collective responsibility and action. This perspective, which was reinforced by participants in the co-design process, shaped every aspect of the project’s development and delivery.

The project employed a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)³ approach, ensuring genuine community involvement and collaboration from inception through to completion. Development involved a 12-member Working Group representing diverse community perspectives, consultations with 144 local residents, and intensive co-design workshops with 20 participants who helped shape the pilot’s strategic direction and specific activities. Iterative development of the pilot relied on feedback and insights from participants, Community Connectors and Volunteers, and registration details and numbers throughout.

Central to the model were Community Connectors – peer facilitators aged 18-30 who served as “social catalysts” within their community. These Connectors received training in social connection facilitation and were empowered to either integrate into existing community activities or create new opportunities for connection. Their role extended beyond simple event coordination; they actively fostered inclusive environments, modelled welcoming behaviours, and provided crucial “scaffolding” that enabled participants to build connections naturally and organically.

Also key to the project’s success were committed and skilled Volunteers who either supported or drove activities across sports, arts and crafts and social dinners.

The project was guided by a Community Advisory Group and supported by a comprehensive communications strategy that extended beyond traditional promotion to create genuine “invitations to connect”.

KEY PROJECT FEATURES

Several distinctive features characterised Connect Up 2617’s delivery and contributed to its success. These included:

- Community Connectors and Volunteers as “social catalysts” and facilitators
- Activities which featured:
 - **“Structured flexibility” and variety**, providing enough organisation to reduce anxiety about what to expect while remaining adaptable to participant preferences and emerging needs. The diverse activity options spanned crafting, games, hiking, music nights, and numerous other activities, deliberately designed to appeal to varied interests and engagement styles.
 - **Regularity and consistency**, with many activities occurring weekly or fortnightly at the same times and locations. This predictability allowed participants to integrate activities into their routines and build anticipation, while also enabling deeper relationship formation through repeated interactions.
 - **Deliberately low-stakes, low-risk, and low-barrier**, removing common obstacles to participation such as social risk, cost, skill requirements, or the pressure of long-term commitment.
 - **Strategic partnering with local venues and businesses**, both supporting community infrastructure and ensuring activities occurred in accessible, age-appropriate spaces.
 - **Creation of alignment and common ground between participants** which helped overcome initial barriers to connection. Common ground was created immediately upfront through the specific age cohorts and local and hyper-local focus; activities were then designed to facilitate shared experiences and mutual interests, whether through collaborative crafting projects, team-based games, or shared appreciation of music and nature. This intentional design element addressed the challenge many young adults face in finding “their people” in increasingly fragmented social landscapes.

Crucially, the project fostered a culture of care and reciprocity, encouraging participants not only to receive support but to contribute to the community. This reciprocal dynamic helped build genuine belonging and ownership, transforming participants from passive recipients into active community members.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS AND IMPACT

Program reach and delivery

- 645 participants across an average of 28 activities per month
 - 379 attended one activity only
 - 177 attended two to four activities
 - 89 attended more than five activities
- Employment and training of 10 Community Connectors as social facilitators
- Support of seven active Volunteers, with 15 total Volunteers signed up by project end.

Impact on loneliness and social connection

The positive impacts of Connect Up 2617 on participants were significant in terms of loneliness, belonging and social connection.

Survey data showed:

- Statistically significant improvements in participants' feelings of companionship (+32.25%), isolation (+36.25%), and exclusion (+32.5%).

OVER
70% HAD MORE FRIENDS THEY
CONNECT WITH MONTHLY

ALMOST
50% HAD MORE FRIENDS THEY
COULD RELY ON FOR HELP

OVER
75% FELT PART OF A
LIKE-MINDED GROUP

NEARLY
90% REPORTED IMPROVED
BELONGING THROUGH
CONNECT UP 2617

Individual and social capacity building

Through qualitative interviews and conversation groups, participants reported meaningful personal growth, including increased social confidence, willingness to engage with new people, and greater resilience in social settings – described by some as building 'social stamina.' Those most deeply involved – Community Connectors, Volunteers, and regular attendees – experienced the most profound impacts, including deep friendships, improved self-belief, and in some cases, renewed capacity to engage with employment and broader life goals.

Interpersonal outcomes

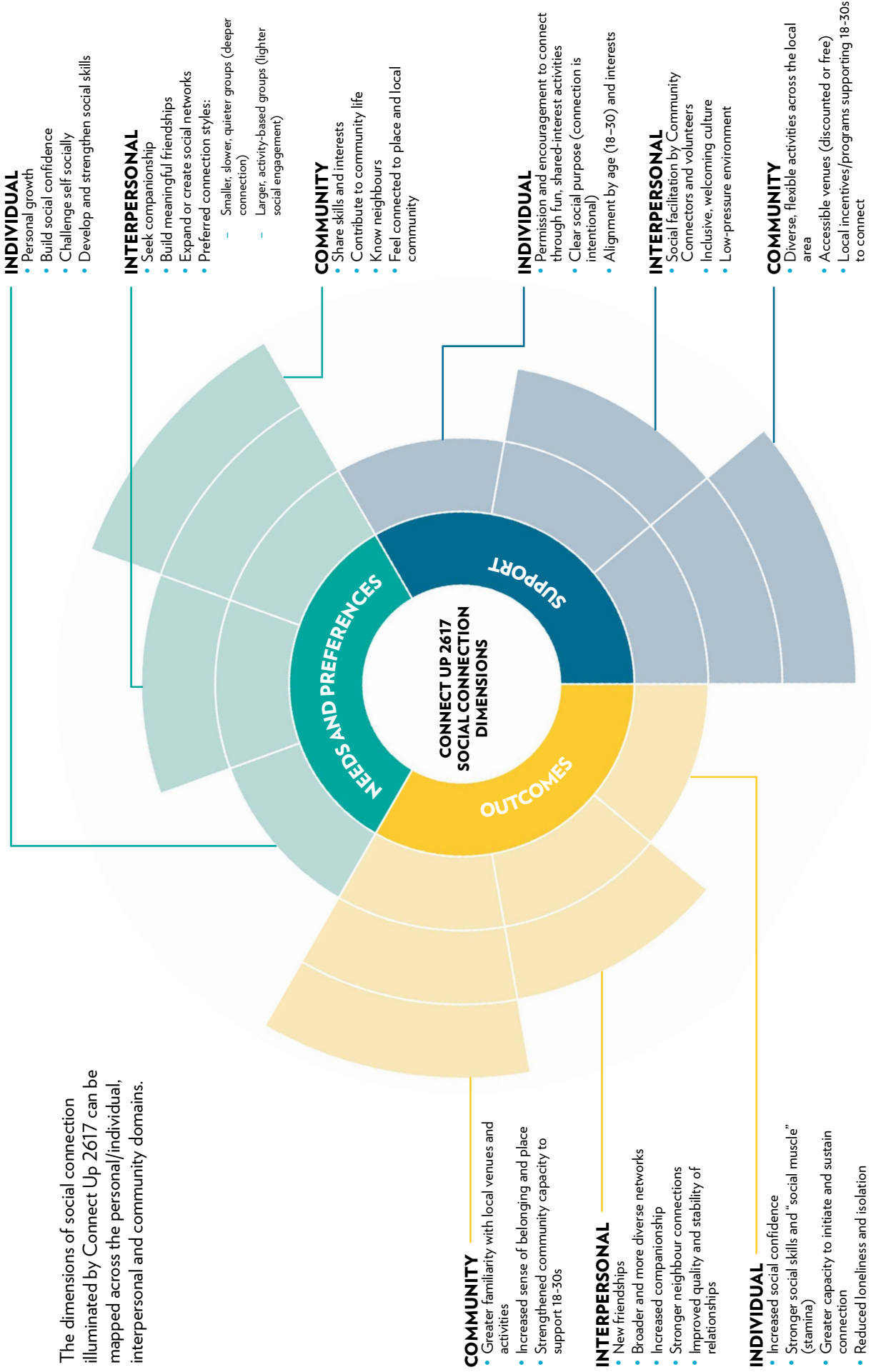
Many participants experienced practical benefits to their sociability and social connections, finding companionship but also reaping functional benefits such as knowing neighbours for safety, not having to rely on work colleagues for friendships, or just being around people because it made them feel better. Some regular participants, volunteers and connectors reported deep friendships and feelings of being valued, together with a deeper understanding and appreciation of community.

Community and place-based outcomes

Connect Up 2617 fostered a stronger sense of place and community belonging among participants. Many reported feeling more at home in Belconnen, with some choosing not to relocate because of the connections formed. Participants from diverse cultural backgrounds broadened their social networks beyond their home communities. Partner venues that actively engaged with the program reported increased foot traffic from younger audiences on quieter nights and a strengthened community identity.

FIGURE 2: SOCIAL CONNECTION DIMENSIONS

The dimensions of social connection illuminated by Connect Up 2617 can be mapped across the personal/individual, interpersonal and community domains.



KEY LEARNINGS

The Connect Up 2617 pilot generated crucial insights into both enablers and barriers for community-based social connection initiatives. Several key learnings emerged with implications for future policy and practice.

1.

The project confirmed that **community-level interventions** can effectively address loneliness when they move beyond individual-focused approaches to embrace socioecological models. The multilayered approach – spanning individual activities, interpersonal facilitation, community partnerships, and supportive policy environments – proved essential. No single element alone would have achieved comparable results; rather, the integration of multiple components created a supportive ecosystem for connection.

2.

The **role of Community Connectors and Volunteers** emerged as critical. These peer facilitators served as “social glue”, welcoming participants, modelling inclusive behaviours, facilitating introductions, and creating psychological safety that enabled participants to take social risks. These peer leaders believed their training in social connection principles and facilitation techniques, together with community development basics, was valuable, suggesting that intentional skill development enhances natural peer support.

3.

Venue **partnerships and accessible third spaces** are fundamental. Even suburbs with social infrastructure may lack appropriate spaces for young adults to gather informally. Successful partnerships required venues willing to accommodate free or low-cost activities at times suitable for young adults, with ambiance and accessibility matching age-group preferences.

4.

Connect Up 2617 highlighted the **power of invitation and permission to connect**. Many participants reported that explicit invitation through project communications and activity facilitation helped overcome internal barriers and social anxiety. The framing of activities as opportunities for connection, rather than simply events to attend, created crucial permission for vulnerable social engagement.

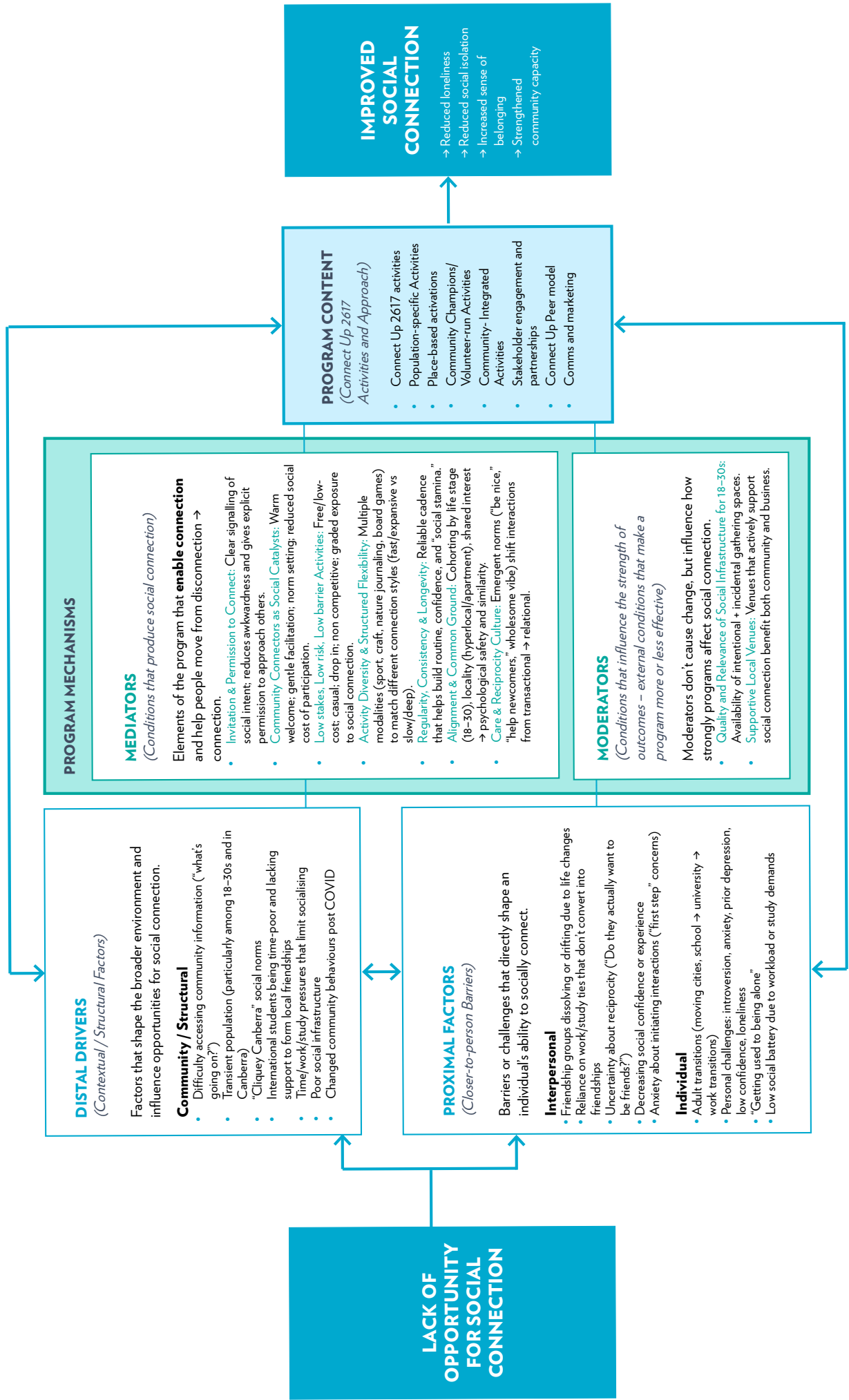
5.

Social connection activities for 18-30s need to be **flexible, varied** but regular, low social risk, accessible with low barriers to entry, free or heavily discounted. These elements will maximise opportunities for attracting and retaining participants and facilitating connections.

6.

Social connection is different for everyone. Diversity in activities to allow for social connection preferences and interests strengthened outcomes, as did the diversity of participants. The range of activity types ensured multiple entry points for engagement, while diversity among Community Connectors and participants enriched the social environment and enabled more people to find relatable peers.

FIGURE 3: A SOCIOECOLOGICAL MODEL: BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY FOR SOCIAL CONNECTION



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the comprehensive evaluation of Connect Up 2617, several key recommendations emerge for policymakers, practitioners, and communities seeking to address loneliness and strengthen social connection among young adults.

1.

EMBED SOCIAL CONNECTIVITY AS WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT, WHOLE OF COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITY

Policy and practice must shift from individual-focused interventions to collective capacity-building for social connection to support people before chronic loneliness develops. This requires coordinated action across multiple sectors and recognition that addressing loneliness benefits entire communities, not just affected individuals. Policies should prioritise funding for community-led initiatives, support co-designed interventions, and integrate social connection metrics into public health and wellbeing frameworks.

2.

ADOPT MULTI-MODAL, PERSON-CENTRED APPROACHES

Effective interventions must work across individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels simultaneously whilst retaining the flexibility to tailor to individuals. The socioecological model of building community capacity for social connection developed through this project provides a framework for comprehensive approaches.

3.

PRIORITISE THOSE AGED 18-30s THROUGH POLICY AND CO-DESIGN

Adults aged 18-30s face particular social connection challenges due to transitions in social networks and life circumstances and report among the highest levels of loneliness. Their social connection needs, and how to meet them, deserve a particular policy and program focus which is best designed and delivered by them.

4.

AUDIT SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE THROUGH A SOCIAL CONNECTION LENS

Suburbs with social infrastructure may still lack useful space for young people to gather. Social connection audits should be undertaken in suburbs with high numbers of 18-30s to identify gaps and opportunities for supporting and promoting third spaces and meeting places for this age group.

5.

CREATE POLICY LEVERS FOR “SOCIALLY CONNECTIVE” VENUES AND ORGANISATIONS

Incentives should encourage venues or organisations to accommodate free or heavily discounted social connection opportunities or activities at times appropriate for young adults aged 18-30s. This might include tax benefits, grants, or recognition programs.

6.

INVEST IN RELATIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES AND ROLES

Social connection can be strengthened through strategies that support peer support and social network building in real-life contexts. These should include peer social facilitators or catalysts who are diverse, reflecting varied backgrounds and interests; casual or Volunteer-based to enable after-hours and weekend availability; and properly trained in social connection facilitation. Supporting and scaling these roles creates both employment opportunities and community benefit.

7.

IMPLEMENT “FIRST STEP” SOCIAL CONNECTION APPROACHES

Programs should incorporate elements proven to be effective in Connect Up 2617, including:

- Creating an invitation and permission to socially connect
- Developing and training Community Connectors as “social catalysts”
- Ensuring activities are:
 - explicit about their purpose of social connection
 - low stakes, low risk, low barriers to entry
 - diverse and have “structured flexibility”
 - recognise diverse social connection needs, preferences and desired outcomes
 - regular, consistent and have longevity
 - designed for alignment and establishment of common ground between participants
- Focus on creating a culture of inclusivity, care and reciprocity.

8.

NORMALISE SOCIAL CONNECTION BY PROMOTING ITS VALUE

Social connection is a fundamental need. By acknowledging the role it plays in our health and being explicit about the value of purposeful connective programs, we can move away from the stigma of loneliness and towards the open pursuit of social connection.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Loneliness and social connection among 18-30s is complex and multi-factorial, leading to challenges unique to this cohort that were learned throughout this project and should be considered in any future interventions.

Like all projects, Connect Up 2617 encountered challenges that offer important lessons for future initiatives.

Time limitations created constraints around activity frequency, geographic coverage, and program duration. The 12-month pilot period, while demonstrating proof of concept, meant that further scale-up and longer-term sustainability was not tested.

Engaging the target demographic proved challenging, particularly in initial months. Many young adults experiencing loneliness face barriers including social anxiety, lack of awareness about opportunities, scheduling conflicts, and scepticism about organised activities. Overcoming these barriers required persistent outreach, diverse communication channels, and the trust-building presence of peer Connectors.

The project also highlighted broader systemic barriers including limited affordable third spaces, restrictive venue policies, and insufficient recognition within policy frameworks of social connection as infrastructure requiring resources and investment. These structural challenges cannot be fully addressed through individual projects and require policy-level intervention.

SUSTAINABILITY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The significant outcomes of Connect Up 2617 have led to its transition from pilot project to mainstream program. Capital Region Community Services (CRCS) is now delivering 'Connect Up' based on the 2617 pilot, with plans for regional expansion beyond the initial Belconnen and Bruce focus areas. This transition represents a crucial validation of the model and creates opportunities for scaling impact.

The project also documented key success factors and developed conceptual models for replicable community-based social connection programs which are included in this report.

It must be noted that sustaining and expanding social connection initiatives drawing on successful elements evidenced in Connect Up 2617 will require ongoing commitment from multiple stakeholders. Continued evaluation will be essential to understand how the model adapts across different contexts and whether outcomes remain robust over longer timeframes. Additionally, documenting and sharing learnings will support other communities seeking to implement similar approaches.

"I feel like if it wasn't for Connect Up, there aren't many opportunities to initiate that initial getting to know strangers."

CONCLUSION

Connect Up 2617 successfully demonstrated that community-based, peer-led approaches can meaningfully address loneliness and strengthen social connection among young adults. The project's comprehensive model – integrating trained Community Connectors, diverse low-barrier activities, strategic venue partnerships, and genuine community participation – produced statistically significant improvements in loneliness and belonging while generating broader community benefits.

The fundamental insight that loneliness is a community responsibility requiring collective action challenges prevailing individual-focused approaches and points toward more effective, sustainable solutions. By treating social connection as essential infrastructure deserving systematic investment and support, communities can create environments where all residents, particularly young adults, have genuine opportunities to connect, belong, and thrive.

As loneliness continues to emerge as a critical public health priority globally, the Connect Up 2617 model offers a practical, evidence-based blueprint for action. Its success in the ACT context suggests broader applicability, while the detailed documentation of both enablers and barriers provides valuable guidance for adaptation to diverse settings. The transition to mainstream delivery through CRCS represents not an endpoint but a beginning – an opportunity to refine, scale-up, test longer-term sustainability and ultimately transform how communities support the fundamental human need for connection.

“I am better at communicating with new peoples. I was so shy. I was so introverted before, like now, I think I can speak more clearly. Like I can speak with my heart, with new peoples.”





INTRODUCTION

Lack of social connection is an emerging public policy priority globally as policymakers, administrators and communities work to address the increasingly well-documented issues surrounding loneliness which is a significant public health challenge, particularly for those aged 18-30. While research interest in supporting social connection is growing, there remains limited focus on broad community or socioecological approaches for addressing this issue.

Connect Up 2617 was a pilot project run by the University of Canberra's Health Research Institute (HRI) from March 2024 to October 2025, trialling ways to strengthen social connection and address loneliness and social isolation among 18-30 year olds in the suburbs of Belconnen and Bruce.

The project was grounded in the perspective (as emphasised by the initial co-design participants) that loneliness and social isolation are not just individual issues but requires community responsibility and collective action.

This report details the project's development, delivery, and evaluation, providing practical insights into the enablers and barriers encountered and key findings for those seeking to build more socially connected communities in and for this age group.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

LONELINESS AND SOCIAL CONNECTION

Loneliness and social isolation are international public health issues, with significant threats to public health and as important areas of focus for the prevention of mental and physical ill-health. Despite extensive (and growing) research, there is a shortage of research and evaluation into effective interventions.

Social connection is a global health priority in its aligned role of addressing loneliness and social isolation. The World Health Organisation recognises social health as equally vital to mental and physical health⁴ with social connection now elevated to global policy level. Social isolation represents the objective lack of social connections, while loneliness is the subjective negative perception of this⁵. Despite significant health risks, awareness remains limited, partly due to inconsistent measurement across OECD countries⁶ and underrepresentation in public health objectives⁷.

Social connection is defined as relating and interacting across structural, functional, and quality dimensions⁸, with a fourth dimension of community connectedness⁹. Poor connection links to increased depression risk¹⁰, while positive connection supports better mental health outcomes.

Contemporary frameworks employ socioecological approaches, including the SOCIAL model¹¹, which examines interpersonal, community and societal influences rather than individual-level interventions alone. Alternative models focus on built environment and place-based approaches.¹²

Emerging adults aged 18-30 represent a critical demographic, identified as the loneliest group in Australia in 2023¹³. The lack of social connection among this age group constitutes a significant public health concern, particularly post-COVID. In taking a socioecological view of social connection interventions, Connect Up 2617 recognised that addressing social disconnection among young people requires systemic, upstream interventions spanning individual, interpersonal, community and societal levels.

“I think that you know, you reach a point of life where it becomes more, more difficult. You know, you’ve fallen away from the natural friend groups when you’re younger and it becomes more difficult to get out and meet people. And I think that often people have a tendency to sit at home and wonder where all their friends are.”

THE LOCAL CONTEXT

This pilot was targeted to the cohorts and areas of greatest need and potential benefit. The Living Well in the ACT Region Survey¹⁴, conducted annually for the ACT government by the HRI, has measured the prevalence of loneliness among adults living in the ACT since 2019. In 2023 the data showed that in the ACT, the highest rates of loneliness were reported by those aged 18-29 (13.6% in 2023) and those aged 30-40 (11.2% in 2023). As a result, the cohort of those aged 18-30s were the focus of Connect Up 2617.

The suburbs of Bruce and Belconnen also have high populations of emerging adults; for example, 44% and 41% of the populations of Belconnen and Bruce, respectively, were aged 18-30 in the 2021 Census, whereas this age group only made up 16% of the population ACT-wide¹⁵.

The populations of these suburbs are not only young they are culturally diverse. In Belconnen, households where a non-English language is used sit at 45.8% compared to the ACT average of 27.1%; Bruce sits at 34%. They also contain a very high percentage of townhouses, flats and apartments (Belconnen 99.6%, Bruce 79.2%) compared to the ACT average (36.6%)¹⁶.

According to the 2023 Belconnen District Plan¹⁷, residents of the broader Belconnen district particularly valued the diverse community of Belconnen, together with the accessibility of foot and cycle paths; natural green areas such as John Knight Park and Lake Ginninderra; the convenience of close shops, restaurants and businesses; and the proximity of institutions and employment destinations such as Canberra International Sports and Aquatic Centre (CISAC), the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS), Belconnen Arts Centre, Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT) and University of Canberra (UC).

The Working Group, local residents and stakeholders who took part in the Connect Up 2617 consultation and co-design phase noted these benefits, but also noted a range of other challenges and barriers to social connection which are outlined in this report.

“Everyone is here temporarily, and then they move, and then they come back.”

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Purpose: To implement and evaluate sustainable ways for 18-30 year olds in Bruce and Belconnen to build meaningful social connections and a sense of belonging and reduce loneliness and social isolation.

Funded by the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF), the project was co-designed with and for the community using a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach¹⁸. Development involved a 12-member Working Group, consultations with 144 residents, and co-design workshops with 20 participants who helped shape the pilot's direction and activities.

Connect Up 2617 was delivered over 12 months from October 2024 to October 2025 and employed 10 casual Community Connectors who served as peer facilitators, integrating into existing community activities or creating new ones to provide space, opportunity, and support for young people to connect. Guided by a Community Advisory Group and supported by a robust communications program, Connect Up 2617 was led by a small Project Team and evolved iteratively and responsively throughout the year based on participant feedback and engagement patterns.

By completion, Connect Up 2617 had engaged 645 participants through diverse, low-pressure activities including crafting, games, hiking, and music nights, strategically integrated with local venues and businesses. Of these, 266 participants attended two or more activities. Evaluation occurred at multiple points through qualitative and quantitative measures, culminating in interviews and conversation groups with participants, Volunteers and Community Connectors, and Project Team staff.

The project enabled the HRI team to document factors of success for social connection programs and activities and to scope out a broad conceptual model of a community approach to social connection that can be replicated in full or part by those working in the space of loneliness and social connection for 18-30s. Participant results were compelling, with research participants and survey respondents demonstrating statistically significant reductions in loneliness (based on the UCLA 3-Item Loneliness Scale¹⁹) and improved feelings of social connection and belonging^{20,21}. Following these successful outcomes, the pilot transitioned to Capital Region Community Services (CRCS) as a mainstream ongoing program with plans for regional expansion.



CONNECT UP 2617

COLLECTIVE SOLUTIONS TO LONELINESS

FIGURE 1: COLLECTIVE SOLUTIONS TO LONELINESS



As developed by local Belconnen and Bruce stakeholders and residents, March - July 2024.

PROJECT TIMELINE

CONSULTATION AND CO-DESIGN

STAGE	TIMEFRAME	DESCRIPTION
Working Group	March-April 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishment of group; workshop scoping out local issues and consultation approach
Community Consultation	April-May 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 140 residents and stakeholders consulted through interviews, meetings, small groups, and survey
Co-design workshops	June-July 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two workshops involving 20 residents and stakeholders to scope out pilot

PROJECT DELIVERY

STAGE	TIMEFRAME	DESCRIPTION
Project setup	August-September 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment and appointment of Connectors; systems setup; Community Connector training
Phase 1: Test and Trial	October-December 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trial new activities, community asset mapping for integration; stakeholder engagement
Phase 2: New arrivals and term starts	January-February 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on new arrivals to Belconnen and Bruce (students/graduates) through activities
Phase 3: Consolidation and winter trial	March-August 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintenance of popular activities; winter indoors activities

TRANSITION AND FUTURE PLANNING

STAGE	TIMEFRAME	DESCRIPTION
Sustainability Planning	July-September 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planning for activity/communities sustainability
Partnership Outreach	July-September 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stakeholder discussions; agreement reached with Capital Region Community Services (CRCS)
Transition	November 2025-March 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with CRCS to transfer project into longer-term program

FRAMING THE APPROACH

CONSULTATION, CO-DESIGN AND COMMUNITY ASSET MAPPING

The Connect Up 2617 pilot was developed with the local community during March-July 2024 to ensure it aligned with local issues and met local needs in an age-appropriate way.

WORKING GROUP

A 12-person Working Group representing the diverse community of people aged 18-30 in Belconnen and Bruce workshopped key local issues faced by local young people and helped frame the consultation process. The list of members can be found in the Community Consultation and Co-design Report²².

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

The consultation involved over 140 Belconnen and Bruce residents and representatives of community organisations contributing through a survey, meetings, interviews and small discussion groups.

The process identified many challenges experienced by young people and those who work with them in the Belconnen and Bruce suburbs, together with a range of community and asset-based strengths that could be built upon in the pilot.

Significant barriers to connection included Canberra's "cliquey" nature, COVID's lasting impacts on social behaviour, and high costs of living. Key challenges included limited public transport, few welcoming community spaces, and lack of activities in Belconnen/Bruce after work or university (i.e. 6pm).

The residents who took part sought regular, low-pressure activities centred on shared interests rather than alcohol, preferring "connection" language over "loneliness". They outlined opportunities including activating public spaces with diverse, age-appropriate programs, establishing community-focused cafés that were open after work/university hours, creation of affordable regular activities (run clubs, book clubs), and the development of both hyperlocal and broader community events that build connections over time.

The resultant Consultation report informed the co-design workshops.

CO-DESIGN WORKSHOPS

Two co-design workshops involving the Working Group and selected consultation participants developed the Connect Up 2617 approach and model. The process was run by HRI and supported by Communication Link, who also assisted in consultation recruitment and facilitation.

Through the co-design workshops, participants scoped out the project – its name, its approach, key stakeholders, model of operation and desired activities that would support it, Community Connector characteristics and more.

The process and outcomes of this collaborative development phase can be found in the Community Consultation and Co-design Report²³.

COMMUNITY ASSET MAPPING

In the co-design process, at the commencement of Connect Up 2617 and then throughout the 12-month period of the project, the Project Team and Community Connectors undertook a Community Asset Mapping exercise of the Bruce and Belconnen suburbs as part of its strengths-based approach. This mapping exercise aimed to determine suitable and willing partners for the project, suitable and supportive venues for activities, and existing activities that may offer opportunities for integration with Community Connectors.

This process highlighted that although these suburbs may appear to have strong social infrastructure²⁴ with a local Community Centre, Library, higher educational institutions and some parks and green spaces, this did not translate to many social connection opportunities for those aged 18-30s. It also did not translate into many local willing partners who were keen to create and support community for this age group, although those partners who were willing to support through involvement, discounts, and staff support became important stakeholders through the project.

The Community Database that was developed throughout the project as a result of the asset mapping could be developed into a website but would need further resources.

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

APPROACH

Connect Up 2617 was run as an Asset-Based Community Development²⁵ project that evolved and was evaluated throughout drawing on the paradigms of participatory health research, primarily Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)²⁶ which ensures that project, research and community partners are equitably involved in all phases of the research process²⁷ and which involve all those who are the focus of the research in a way that is practical, collaborative and empowering²⁸.

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach of both quantitative and qualitative analysis and data collection which has been triangulated to evaluate both the program's processes and outcomes.

Connect Up 2617 involved multiple intervention approaches across a range of locations, settings and community partnerships which aimed to identify and respond to local opportunities with a view to embedding groups and activities and identifying the elements of a self-sustaining and community-led model in the process.

To this end the research and evaluation process was flexible, iterative and run throughout the 12 months to both gauge effectiveness of the project process as it rolled out, and to explore the progressive outcomes of the pilot together with enablers and barriers to success. As the Project Team learned throughout the process the pilot and its activities evolved in response, involving research participants and stakeholders in ideas and decision-making²⁹. The problem conceptualisation and evaluation questions evolved throughout from process to project outcomes, also moving from loneliness alleviation to social connection from a socioecological perspective.

PROJECT ASSUMPTIONS

Connect Up 2617 made the following assumptions drawn from the research and the consultation and co-design phase which were integrated into the program design.

- Research highlights the stigma around loneliness and the negative associations with people identifying as lonely³⁰. Participants in the preliminary co-design process also strongly believed that loneliness is a community issue, and that tackling it is a community responsibility.
- The participatory research and co-design approach of this project placed the community and 18-30 year old cohort at its centre³¹; activities, programs and approaches trialled were informed by the initial co-design process and thereafter by ongoing feedback.
- The consultation process for Connect Up 2617 and co-design process suggested that the community, local institutions, organisations and businesses may have a high level of support and interest in developing positive approaches for social connection at a local level, including residents volunteering as leaders in the program³².

CONTEXT/ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

External environmental factors scoped at the start of the project included:

- The high proportion of university and higher education students in the suburbs of Belconnen and Bruce due to the location of the University of Canberra and Canberra Institute of Technology (Bruce campus) within the locale. There is a degree of transience to the population among 18-30 year olds in the area associated with the academic calendar.
- For economic context, high costs of living may be associated with people having less availability due to employment needs.
- Community partnerships are contingent on businesses, organisations and institutions having shared alignment with the need for reducing loneliness in the target group, as well as capacity to partner.
- Belconnen and Bruce have a large number of high-density residential dwellings and university residences and a comparably small number of commercial and social facilities, activities and events facilitating social connection for the 18-30 year old age group.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS AND METHODS

Process evaluation

KEY QUESTION	DIMENSION	STANDARDS/INDICATORS	DATA COLLECTION
How well is Connect Up 2617 run as a responsive CBPR project involving stakeholders and community members?	Merit/responsiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants feel involved and are empowered to shape and enhance the program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> June 2024: Consultation and co-design reports December 2024: First round of Community Connector interviews March 2025: Participant survey
How well is Connect Up 2617 being executed in terms of management and governance, documentation of enablers and barriers and reaching the target group?	Merit/implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10% (approx. 600) of target population are aware and engaged in program Principles of good governance are met Enablers (and how they are actioned) and barriers (and how they are addressed) are documented 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Throughout: Activity registrations and event headcounts Monthly: Communications reach and usage (web, social media, media) March 2025: Project Team review

INFORMAL FEEDBACK FOR ITERATIVE PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

Feedback was sought throughout the project to ensure responsiveness to community needs and wants.

This was ensured through:

- Weekly – meetings with HRI Project Team staff
- Fortnightly – Community Connector meetings with the Project Team
- Quarterly – Community Advisory Group meetings in November 2024, March and July 2025, with a final workshop in September 2025.

Outcomes evaluation

KEY QUESTION	DIMENSION	STANDARDS/INDICATORS	DATA COLLECTION
How is Connect Up 2617 achieving its desired outcomes in terms of improved social connection and reduced loneliness among the target group?	Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual: Reduced loneliness, increased social connection and sense of community belonging among target group (UCLA-3) Partners: Number, quality, sustainability (CBPR) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> March 2025, September-October 2025: Participant conversation groups and interviews September 2025: Advisory Group/Community Connector final workshop
How can Connect Up 2617 (in whole or part) be sustainable in Belconnen and Bruce, and what are the enablers or barriers to this?	Significance/sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved community capacity to support ongoing social connection among target group (individual, partner, community) Self-sustaining resources, program elements, partners or funding sources beyond MRFF e.g. number of Volunteers trained 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> September - October 2025: Volunteer interviews October 2025: Stakeholder/partner interviews October 2025: Second round of Community Connector interviews October 2025: Participant survey

DATA COLLECTION

Research participant numbers

Consultation and co-design	Groups and interviews	n=38
	Survey	n= 76
	Meetings and presentations	30 attendees
Survey	Midpoint survey #1: Participants who had attended two or more	n= 115
	End survey #2: Participants who had attended two or more activities	n= 86
Qualitative Interviews and Small Conversation Groups	Project Team and Stakeholders	n= 7
	Community Connectors	n= 10
	Volunteers	n= 7
	Participants	n=38
	Advisory Group workshop (Connectors and Advisory Group)	n=15

Connect Up 2617 Advisory Group

Process (anecdotal feedback):

The Connect Up 2617 Advisory Group met in September 2024, March and July 2025. In these meetings members were kept updated on progress, issues and challenges by the Project Team, and contributed their feedback and suggestions for implementation. These ideas and suggestions were used to continuously improve and amend the project throughout. The incorporation of this feedback into project delivery is outlined in this report.

Outcomes:

All members participated in a final feedback workshop on 25 September 2025, together with the Project Team, Community Connectors and key Volunteers. The incorporation of this feedback was triangulated to support the findings outlined here.

Surveys

Participants

Process:

A process survey of participants was run in March 2025 to seek feedback on implementation (activities and communication), ideas for activities and how the Project Team could engage greater participation from residents.

Outcomes:

Another survey was run with participants in October 2025 to explore the impacts of the project on individual perceptions of loneliness, isolation, social and community connection.

Conversation groups and interviews

Participants, Volunteers and Community Connectors

Process:

Interviews were first held with Community Connectors in December 2024 to explore their perceptions of project management, team culture, decision-making capacity and involvement, project delivery, and community/individual impact on social connection and loneliness. These interviews were considered and analysed, with suggestions and themes incorporated into ongoing project delivery and management.

The HRI Project Team held a group debrief in March 2025 to reflect on project progress and team dynamics, with reflections and insights incorporated into how the project was managed thereafter.

Outcomes:

Small conversation groups and interviews were held with regular participants in March 2025, then again with participants and Volunteers and some stakeholders, in September-October 2025, to explore their experiences of the activities and the processes through which they became socially connected.

Interviews were held again with Community Connectors in October 2025 at the conclusion of the project.

Interviews and conversation groups were recorded and transcribed and thematically analysed after de-identification. All those participating provided informed consent.

Discussion guides supported all interviews and/or focus groups to explore:

- Program context and alignment with program goals
- Values of the program in relation to community-based strengths and resources
- Program participation and collective decision-making
- Experiences of stakeholders, Volunteers and Connectors
- Implementation-related enablers, barriers and process learnings
- Experience with community and personal capacity building
- Impact of the program on community, social connections and loneliness.

Moderation Guides can be provided by contacting the Report Authors.

DATA ANALYSIS

The primary method of qualitative data analysis used in this study was inductive thematic analysis – drawing from the data to code transcripts, then clustering codes and sub-codes to generate multi-dimensional themes conceptualised as patterns of shared meaning grouped around central concepts³³. This was a subjective process where the researchers were active and reflexive in analysing and generating themes and conclusions from the data³⁴.

To assist in conceptual development of findings and proposed models included in this report, the Project Team applied data triangulation, drawing from other sources such as survey results, final Advisory Group workshop outcomes and Project Team debriefs so conclusions drawn and proposed theoretical models were drawn from multiple perspectives and data points.

Findings were also presented to target groups to validate findings.





PROJECT DELIVERY

CONNECT UP 2617

AT A GLANCE

10 PEER COMMUNITY CONNECTORS

28 ACTIVITIES A MONTH

On average across sport and activity, arts and crafts, environment and outdoors, music and entertainment, food and games.

07 VOLUNTEERS HELPED DRIVE AND SUPPORT ACTIVITIES

15 Volunteers in total signed up by project end as part of the ongoing program.

645 PARTICIPANTS IN TOTAL

379 attended one activity only,
177 attended two to four activities,
89 attended five or more activities.

MARKETING AND PROMOTION

through website, weekly e-newsletter Belco Buzz, Instagram and Facebook, printed collateral.

COMMUNITY GUIDANCE

through Connect Up 2617 Advisory Group.

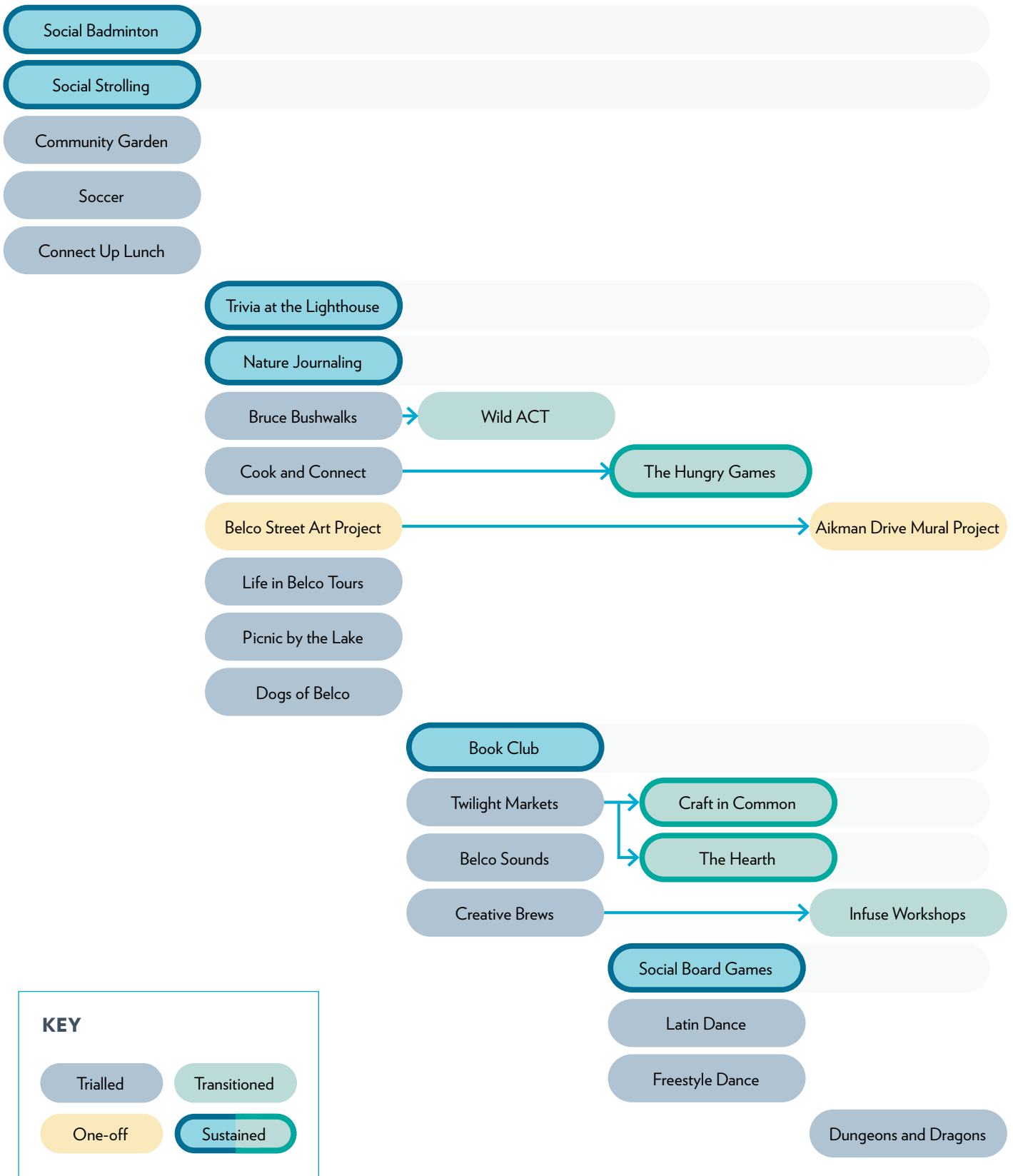
"I still have a lot of that anxiety, but I am definitely more willing to try and socialise now than I was before because I've got those positive experiences."

ACTIVITY TIMELINE

OCT NOV DEC JAN FEB MAR APR MAY JUN JUL AUG SEP OCT NOV

2024

2025





PROJECT MANAGEMENT

The Project Team at the Health Research Institute was small, flexible and responsive, working closely with the team of casual Community Connectors to develop the project iteratively, responding to Connector feedback from participants; registration and attendance numbers; Connector views on what was effective in terms of social connection and participant support; cost, feasibility and availability of local venues and organisations willing to be involved in the project.

Connect Up 2617 Project Team responsibilities

- **Director, Health Research Institute:** Overall direction and guidance.
- **Project Lead:** Consultation and co-design; oversight and management of project delivery, evaluation and research; staff management and support; stakeholder and venue liaison, secretariat and lead for Advisory Group.
- **Public Space Activation and Community Engagement Lead:** Local stakeholder engagement, local space activation (Grazier Lane, Margaret Timpson Park).
- **Communication Lead:** Strategic communication advice; coordination of outreach communication including website, Humanitix registrations, weekly Belco Buzz enewsletter, hardcopy printing and collateral.
- **Research Officers:** Coordination of data collection including activity registrations.
- **Social Media:** Content creation across Facebook and Instagram.
- **Design:** Design of digital and hardcopy materials, social media statistics and evaluation, strategic guidance on social media.
- **Community Connectors:** On the ground activity organisation and social facilitation; feedback and collaboration with project team on project progress and development.
- **Community Connector Supervisor:** Mentorship and support of Community Connectors during activities for skills development and effective facilitation.

Stakeholder engagement

A variety of local organisations were involved in the Connect Up 2617 original Working Group, which then changed composition into an organisational Advisory Group, providing crucial ongoing links into the community and continual co-creation of the project as it evolved throughout the year.

The final Advisory Group involved representation from:

- ACT Government
- ACT Child & Youth Mental Health Sector Alliance (Youth Reference Group)
- Belconnen Arts Centre
- Belconnen Community Council
- Capital Region Community Services (CRCS)
- CIT Student Association
- CIT (Community Development)
- The Youth Coalition of the ACT
- University of Canberra (Student Equity and Participation)

Other organisations were key partners enabling different aspects of the project. These included representatives from the Belconnen Alliance of High-living Apartments (BAHA) who provided access into some apartment buildings and secured support and promotion of activities; CITSA, who were an engaged and creative partner in developing opportunities for their students with Connect Up 2617; the ACT Government through its support of two street art murals (also supported through initial advice from Belco Arts); and a local bar, pub and some local cafes who were supportive of connection through willingness to provide space for people to gather and offer some discounts to participants and Volunteers.

THE ROLE OF PEER COMMUNITY CONNECTORS

The approach

Some 10 Community Connectors were first recruited in July 2024; as staff were casual and they fitted in these roles around work and study, this number waxed and waned throughout the year with some leaving and some new recruits. By project close, six Connectors remained as a tight and cohesive group.

Peer to peer model

All Connectors were aged from 22-30 years, mostly lived, worked or studied in the region and were from a variety of cultural and professional backgrounds with a range of diverse professional experiences, interests and skills. They all had lived experience of loneliness or an interest and passion in loneliness, social connection and community.

The role

The Connectors were recruited as facilitators, welcomers, and friendly faces of all activities. Their role included identification of opportunities and barriers to participation at a grassroots level; activity setup and packdown; social facilitation of activities by ensuring everyone was welcome, including those who were on their own or first-timers; facilitating conversation and helping create connection among participants.

Challenges and barriers

Based on the quantitative materials collected some key challenges and barriers³⁵ emerged:

- Connectors reflected the project target demographic which was both a strength in terms of authenticity and empathy, and a challenge for the Project Team and group cohesiveness. They were busy with multiple jobs or study commitments, had irregular schedules, diverse cultural backgrounds, a variety of skills and varying professional maturity.
- Given their varying ages and skills, Connectors required ongoing supervision and support. The differing levels of skills and professional experience caused team issues within the group at times.
- Training needs included: role playing scenarios, group dynamics, conversation facilitation, recognising/supporting neurodiverse and chronically lonely participants, and cultural awareness. Not all of these training needs were met.
- The Connectors needed clearer role definitions and boundaries, and delineation between what they could and couldn't offer, given their lack of training as community developers.
- The role was hard to "switch off" from, particularly with the use of Whatsapp communications, which sometimes made the casual role feel full-time with more responsibility.

Enablers

Training and support

The Connectors were recruited in July and inducted with a half-day workshop in August. All were supported in completing First Aid Training and were offered Mental Health First Aid Training. Thereafter they were supported through:

- Fortnightly meetings with the HRI Project Team and other Connectors to report back, troubleshoot and plan out the project in the short and longer-term.

Their training needs evolved and were identified throughout. For example, the Project Team and Connectors identified that they needed greater support in socially facilitating groups, particularly where participants may be quiet or nervous or where dynamics required more intervention. To assist them in this, the Project Team organised:

- Personal mentorship and supervision by a Community Development Adviser who supported them in activities
- Additional support and training through a) a Social Facilitation workshop offered by the UC Medical and Counselling Service, and b) an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) two-day training by the Jeddah Institute.

Team culture

According to the Connectors, they:

- Felt valued, trusted and empowered through the responsive and supportive Project Team, with in-person fortnightly meetings and team building fostering cohesion
- Appreciated the freedom and flexibility to experiment with new ideas and approaches – even though the iterative nature of the project sometimes felt "messy" as a result
- Felt they grew in professional and skills development, increased knowledge about and passion for community development and social connection
- Believed they had strengthened social connections and team cohesion within the team and with project participants by the project end
- Believed strong relationships with participants drove program retention, with free activities and welcoming spaces boosting participation.

"I think the Connectors played a big part of it because initially, because of my anxiety when I go to something I'm not very good at socialising and like taking that first step to talk to people. But the connectors, they took that first step, they talked to me, they kind of got to know me and they introduced me to people."

COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS – VOLUNTEERS

Local Volunteers emerged throughout the project and became core, constant pillars of local, resident-driven and supported activities which lasted throughout the project.

Residents in local apartment blocks drove hyper-local gatherings onsite, in a common kitchen on one level of the apartment; or onsite outside in BBQ areas. These regular food-based gatherings attracted varying but solid participation and contributed to an increased sense of belonging and community among the resident Volunteers.

Volunteers emerged from the creative fields with skills and passion they wanted to share. A skilled nature journaler ran quiet, monthly nature journaling activities for small groups which were well received and created opportunities for deep connection. Others arose from the Twilight Markets and created their own craft-based activities, The Hearth and Craft in Common: Sip n Stitch. These regular gatherings were extremely successful and created some of the strongest, most supportive and inclusive communities in the project.

Other Volunteers just wanted to contribute – these included an experienced badminton player who helped coach those playing badminton and a skilled embroiderer who supported other Volunteers in Sip n Stitch.

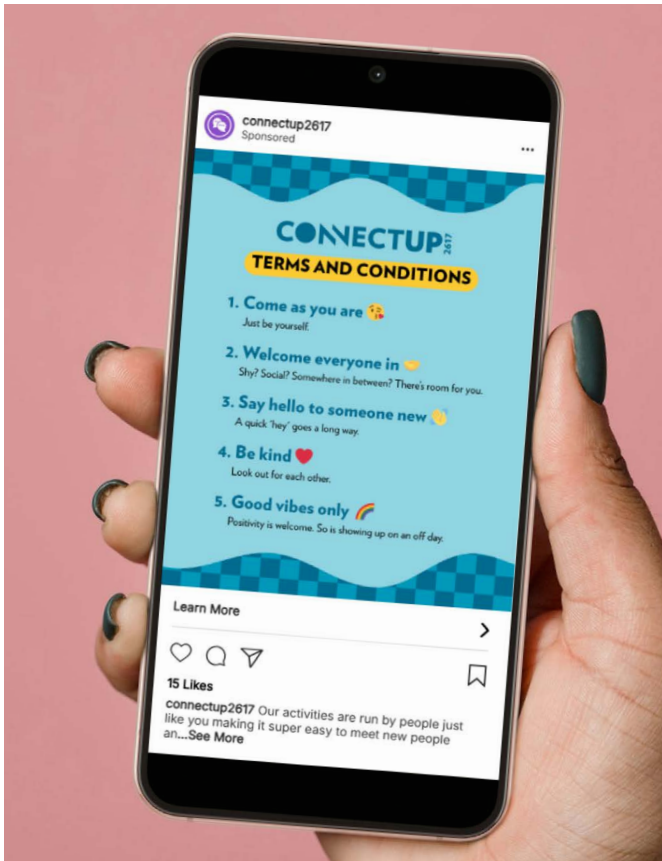
The Volunteers interviewed (n= 5) reported their involvement in the project had profound impacts on them, ranging from a sense of “joy” from being involved in creating community, to rediscovering or enhancing their capacities and confidence, to feeling empowered.

“... to start a whole community was really wonderful.”

7 VOLUNTEERS
THROUGHOUT
PROJECT

15 VOLUNTEERS
SIGNED UP





ACTIVITIES FOR SOCIAL CONNECTION

Connect Up 2617 developed and delivered a diverse range of activities designed to provide social connection opportunities that matched varied preferences, schedules, and interests across the community. The program included interest-based activities such as sport (badminton), arts (street art, creative gallery visits), games (board games and Dungeons & Dragons), outdoor adventures (hiking), environmental projects (community garden), and music events. Population-specific initiatives targeted parents and carers (social strolling) and students (cooking and games sessions). Place-based activations included twilight markets, while Volunteer-run activities fostered arts and crafts communities. The project also integrated with existing community events like pub trivia, creating accessible entry points for those seeking connection in familiar settings.

Throughout the project it became clear that the Connect Up 2617 ethos of friendliness and inclusivity that Connectors attempted to set as the behavioural norms for all activities should be articulated and promoted upfront. These “principles” were workshopped by the Community Connectors, designed into the Connect Up 2617 “Code” and included upfront in all communications around activities.

“this activity can build an environment to find the like-minded people ... when I was going to the gallery, I was finding the people who are interested in art ... and when I was going to the social badminton, I was meeting some people who were really professional in the badminton and who were professional athletes ... by designing different types of events, you have an opportunity to find the people in that field.”

“if I was just having coffee with someone, I wouldn't really know what to talk to them about or what to say. But if I'm playing board games, we're actively doing something, we're talking about the game so it's easier to have like that fun banter between us and have something to connect over.”



PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

645 PARTICIPANTS IN TOTAL

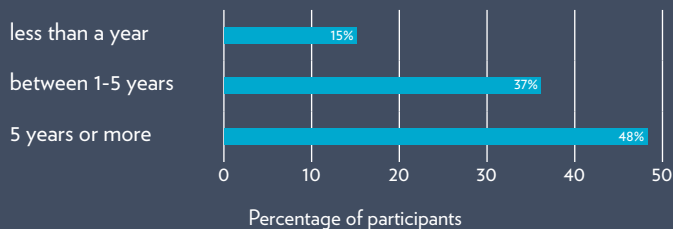
379 attended one activity only,
177 attended two to four activities,
89 attended five or more activities.

Survey responses indicated that:

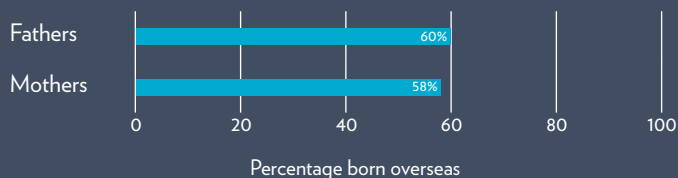
OVER 47% BORN OUTSIDE AUSTRALIA

Notably India, China, Nepal and the Philippines. Other countries of birth included Iran, UK, Bahrain, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Mauritius, Morocco, Pakistan, Papua new Guinea, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Thailand and the UAE.

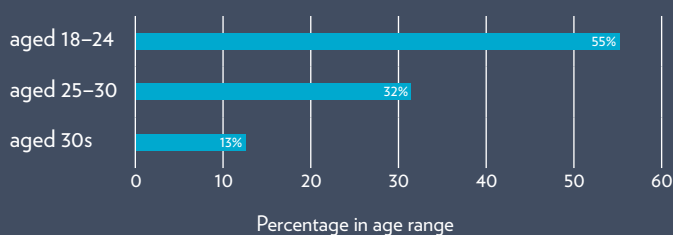
Time Living in Canberra



Parents' Country of Birth



Age Distribution





INTEREST-BASED ACTIVITIES

SPORT

Social Badminton (weekly)

Every week, social badminton was held at the Belconnen Community Centre. Connect Up 2617 hired the courts, supported one to two Community Connectors to set up, pack down and facilitated round-robin social play, welcomed in all participants and facilitated connection in a low-key way. One participant volunteered as a coach to help upskill participants. The two-hour session always finished up with (free) pizza and conversation. Badminton was popular, with 15-20 participants every week, and positive feedback from participants throughout.

“It has been kind of very positive and friendly experience. I could meet lots of new people, different cultures, different viewpoints and everything. And also I could improve my playing skills and I feel like that it’s a place to meet new people to do some exercise.”

ENABLERS

- Connect Up 2617 organisation of courts and pizzas
- Age alignment
- Free badminton and pizza
- Connectors and no competition = social, easygoing
- One Volunteer coach to support skills development
- Participant diversity

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

- Round-robin structure needed some gentle enforcing
- Over-subscription meant numbers needed to be capped and enforced
- Some badminton skills needed (gained through Volunteer coach).

LESSONS LEARNED

- Non-competitive, low barrier to entry plus facilitation contributed to social easygoing culture; everyone given a go.
- Lighter and wider social connections are facilitated by joint activity, exercise and skills



ART

Street painting murals (one-off projects)

<p>ENABLERS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ACT Government support and approvals • Experienced and well-known artists appealing • Appeal of skill development (urban art) and low-pressure learning environment
<p>CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion and recruitment – difficult to encourage people to participate. 50% of those registered attended. • Workshops need to be structured to feature social facilitation • Irregular timing of workshops confusing
<p>LESSONS LEARNED</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing and promotion needs to be extensive and targeted to encourage participation • Workshops and painting sessions need frequent regularity to encourage repeat attendance • Skills development and socialisation are effective partners in an activity • Street art workshops help build a sense of place and community in participants



CASE STUDY

BELCO STREET ART PROJECT AND THE AIKMAN DRIVE MURAL PROJECT

Connect Up 2617's Belco Street Art Project was a one-off series of workshops and mural painting project that created opportunities for young locals interested in street art and connection to co-design and deliver a mural in Margaret Timpson Park in Belconnen. Co-funded with the ACT Government's Suburban Land Agency, it aimed to foster social connections and activate public space, helping locals feel a sense of belonging to place and community.

Using a Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD) framework, three local street art specialists facilitated four workshops over three months, followed by a final mural painting session in Margaret Timpson Park. Workshops explored Belconnen's identity through themes of people, place, and stories, using participatory co-design with small groups trialling street art designs.

Connect Up 2617 partnered with the Suburban Land Agency Placemaking team and was advised in the process by the Belconnen Arts Centre. Promotion included on-site signage, social media, and flyers distributed across local venues including CIT, UC, cafes, and retail outlets.

Seventeen people participated in the workshops and the painting which was less than expected and less than those who had registered, which was possibly a result of irregular timing. Despite this those who participated helped create a vibrant community mural with participants valuing meeting like-minded people and trying new art forms in a safe, informal environment. The project transformed perceptions of the previously overlooked park space, with participants expressing ownership and pride.

“When I walk past Margaret Timpson Park, I’m just gonna remember all this stuff that we did in the mural ... there’s that ownership that I feel has grown.”

The artists and project staff involved noted that although commonalities in age, locale and interest in street art made it easier for participants to make connections, the lack of continuity in participation made the connections not as deep.

The project inspired a similar successful initiative in Belconnen, the Aikman Drive Mural Project, which was completed by UC and Connect Up 2617 participants in late 2025 and was again supported by the ACT Government.



ART

Creative Brews (fortnightly)

Creative Brews was held at the Belco Arts Centre every fortnight. A Community Connector showed participants around the galleries at Belco Arts – introducing a younger demographic to the space – and followed this up with free coffees and an art activity at the adjoining café. Creative Brews attracted between three and eight people every fortnight, some of whom were repeat participants.

Connect Up 2617 then supported Creative Brews to become one of the free Infuse Workshops presented by Belco Arts, to support those participants to undertake more diverse local arts activities. Four workshops were held until the end of 2025.

ENABLERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Willingness of Belco Arts to have Connect Up 2617 host the activity • Enthusiastic Community Connector with links to Belco Arts through internship • Willingness of Kiln café to host painting and craft activities
CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regularity, but no development from one fortnight to the next which discouraged repeat participation
LESSONS LEARNED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities need frequent regularity as well as capacity for repeat attendance to facilitate building of social connections • Supportive venues are necessary for embedded connecting activities



GAMES

Social Board Games and D&D (weekly)

Social Board Games were held weekly at Qure, a local Bar and Grill, with one or two Community Connectors taking part and facilitating conversation and keeping the games flowing. A variety of different games were provided and participants also bought their own, and Qure offered a 20% discount on food and drink on an otherwise quiet night for the venue. Social Board Games attracted between 8-15 participants weekly with high numbers of repeat participants.

Dungeons & Dragons was initiated weekly on Sunday afternoons at the Belconnen Community Centre, and although participation was reasonable (three to six weekly) this did not continue past December 2025.

ENABLERS

- Supportive and friendly venue (Qure 20% discount on food and drink)
- Friendly Connectors who were also into games
- Right activity for the right venue

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

- None

LESSONS LEARNED

- If supportive, venues can help build community, attract a clientele and boost sales on quiet days through games or similar activities
- Social Board Games suit (and appeal to) people who prefer slow connection in smaller groups



OUTDOORS

Wild ACT (fortnightly and monthly)

Two different types of outdoor hiking activities were introduced by Connect Up 2617 under the banner of Wild ACT. One fortnight was a local walk around the local suburbs which feature wild areas and bushland; the next fortnight was a bigger half or one-day hike, which required transport or carpooling and some knowledge of local walks and outdoor safety. The walks were led by Connectors with knowledge of hiking and walking and a love of the outdoors.

Numbers were low on the walks (between three and eight), particularly compared to the amount of resources and effort put into transport and facilitation, although they did attract repeat participation. The walks concluded after four months with Connector offers to the group (on Whatsapp) to accompany them on local Meetup walks, which did not then eventuate.

ENABLERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connectors keen to engage in the outdoors • Connectors trained in First Aid and outdoor skills • Local opportunities for interesting and “wild” outdoor walks
CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of engagement and participation from local residents • High resource cost to take participants on walks on weekends
LESSONS LEARNED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is interest from local and international residents to engage in the outdoors, but there are existing MeetUps that can be promoted to younger people to meet this need • Responsibility for outdoor safety and transport needs to be carried by the group unless the organiser is a specialist in the field



ENVIRONMENT

Community Garden (weekly)

The UCX Community Garden at University of Canberra had fallen into disrepair, and one of the activities suggested in the Community Co-design process for Connect Up 2617 was a Community Garden. The Connect Up 2617 team saw the opportunity to combine these needs and invested significant energy and resources to rejuvenating this Garden, including recruiting a student community garden specialist as a Connector to lead the process; investing in plants and infrastructure; hosting and promoting regular Dig It gardening and cooking/eating in the garden sessions, and approaching local cafes for sponsorship.

Although the garden itself grew into a thriving University resource with edible food and herbs, it did not thrive as a place for social connection. Attendance was variable at the gardening and cooking sessions with very few repeat participants, and the objective of creating a student gardening society was not achieved. The garden was consequently taken over by partner UCX, with the intention of maintaining it as a Volunteer-managed resource.

ENABLERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Committed and experienced Connectors Existing (slightly degraded) infrastructure for garden
CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of interest and engagement by local students and student societies Difficulty in promoting to, and reaching, a diverse range of students Location of the garden away from public transport or car parking made community involvement difficult Garden needed constant tending, increasing resource time and costs
LESSONS LEARNED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An existing cohort of students committed to the Community Garden needed to be identified and supported first to ensure they were involved with it from the start. This would have ensured buy-in from a wider base than committed Connectors



MUSIC

Belco Sounds (intermittent)

Further to suggestions from the Advisory Group that more indoors activities were needed during the Canberra winter of 2025, two Connectors developed Belco Sounds – a three-month winter trial of fortnightly music gigs at local venues to showcase both local venues and local artists, and to provide a space for 18-30s who enjoyed music to meet.

After much searching for venues, gigs were held at The Potbelly, The Basement (The Baso) and Kiln Café. Attendance was variable (between 10-30) and feedback suggested that locals would not go to gigs to meet new friends. Belco Sounds finished at the end of winter with many lessons learned.

ENABLERS

- Committed Connectors
- Promotion through artists' social media was helpful
- Branding was fun and effective

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

- Audience attendance variable. No returning people, no-one on their own, and no Connect Up 2617 participants.
- Difficult to find local artists who were seeking exposure (although participating artists were grateful)
- Shortage of suitable local venues – accessible, low-cost, cosy for connection
- Lack of consistency in venues and times

LESSONS LEARNED

- Needs to involve people in the industry from the start who could also look at workshops and other ways to engage people interested in music
- Stakeholders need to be invested in community, not business or the music industry
- People didn't come along on their own to Belco Sounds – they came with friends. People were also interested in the music not connection. So vehicle not useful for people who were seeking social connection



POPULATION-SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES

Social Strolling (weekly)

Every week, a Community Connector (a mum herself), walked around Lake Ginninderra, inviting other parents, carers and bubs to join her, followed by free coffees at local café Stella's By The Lake. Numbers varied between three and eight a week, with 19 participants coming to two or more strolls demonstrating some regularity and consistency.

"...speaking from the kind of perspective of a new parent, I think it can be really overwhelming ... I think it helps to have people that you can be really vulnerable and authentic with, but if you don't have that and you just get this kind of glossy picture of what new motherhood looks like, in particular in the media, it can be incredibly lonely ... just being able to talk to people about those things I think really helps."

ENABLERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community Connector – welcoming, good facilitator, mum herself Regular yet flexible – join anytime Alignment with others Free coffees
CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotion; reaching the right people Turnover as parents/carers went back to work or moved
LESSONS LEARNED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frequent regularity with flexibility key – join anytime People want to share experiences and talk with others in the same situation A combination of activities – such as walking, talking and coffee – encourages connection



Cook & Connect Kitchen (monthly) then CIT Hungry Games (weekly)

Connection over food and games at the Canteen at CIT, Bruce campus. Activities started with Cook & Connect Kitchen, where students cooked dinner for others in the CIT commercial kitchen, assisted by the CIT Chef. This was held monthly.

Further to consultation with CIT and involved Volunteers and Connectors, this then moved into a more regular activity of weekly, lunchtime casual food and games – Hungry Games in the CIT Canteen. This proved to be more popular and lower resource-intensive.

ENABLERS

- Embedded location on campus
- Supportive partners (CITSA)

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

- Cooking food together presents WH&S and safety issues
- Frequent regularity is needed – monthly not sufficient

LESSONS LEARNED

- Cooking food together is powerful but limited to small numbers
- Eating together is powerful but requires structure and diversity
- Frequently regular, low-effort, low-resources activities are key



PLACE-BASED ACTIVATIONS

Connect Up 2617 Twilight Markets (monthly)

The theme of local markets was raised consistently throughout the co-design process for Connect Up 2617 so the Project Team embarked on designing and delivering markets that focussed on community and connection, not transaction, based in Margaret Timpson Park in Belconnen. This proved to be a significant venture. Two markets were held, the first one attracting some 250 people, the second just over 100 people. It was decided that these numbers didn't justify the unfeasible amount of resources, time and money spent and they could only be held monthly, given the effort and expense, which was not frequently regular enough to build momentum.

Team observations and surveys completed by vendors showed that the events were community-focussed with a great "vibe", and that participants appreciated the activation of the Park. They also noted that the real connection made was between the craft workshop vendors and facilitators themselves. Consequently Connect Up 2617 worked with these facilitators to support their spinoff venture, The Hearth, which became a successful part of the project attracting regular numbers and a dedicated following.

ENABLERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committed Connect Up 2617 Markets project team
CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant time, money and resources made regular markets unachievable • Shortage of community organisations willing to participate on a weekend • Food vans and trucks need significant numbers to make attendance worthwhile
LESSONS LEARNED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Markets are not conducive to personal connection, unless they involve free workshops or learning skills. • Frequent regularity is needed • Lower-resource, lower pressure, frequent sharing activities with smaller numbers help create connection



VOLUNTEER-RUN ACTIVITIES

ARTS AND CRAFTS

The Hearth (fortnightly) and Sip n Stitch (weekly)

The Hearth was developed by a group of local creatives who wanted to share and foster skills and create an inclusive and welcoming space for people to learn, practice and make together. This was held every second Saturday afternoon at the Belconnen Community Centre. The Hearth also spun off into Craft in Common: Sip n Stitch, which was specifically for crafters and stitchers, which was held weekly at Qure Bar and Grill in Bruce on a Thursday evening.

“sometimes, I saw some people first time attend ... everyone will give them help to get involved like, ‘You can sit here. We can sit together’. Yeah. Or we will have an easy greeting ... we will help each other”

Both activities were popular, attracting regular repeat participation (The Hearth between five and 30 a fortnight; Sip n Stitch between three and 12 a week) and fostered friendly and supportive communities.

ENABLERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-led through Volunteers • Existing community keen to learn crafts • LGBTQIA+ friendly • Open inclusive culture • Free refreshments • After hours scheduling
CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Venues to host gatherings – eventually found the Belconnen Community Centre (The Hearth) and Kiln Cafe/Qure (Sip n Stitch)
LESSONS LEARNED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arts and crafts support slow/deep connection • Inclusive Volunteers set behavioural norms of respect and support • Circular relaxed seating supports no-hierarchical connection • Frequent regularity key



ARTS AND CRAFTS

Nature Journaling (monthly)

Nature Journaling was run monthly around Lake Ginninderra by a Connect Up 2617 Volunteer, herself an experienced and passionate nature journaler. The two-hour sessions were designed for small groups and slow, deep connection and fulfilled this aim, with between two and six people attending each month.

ENABLERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passionate and experienced Volunteer • Local Lake Ginninderra and John Knight parks providing easy access to nature
CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weather sometimes forced cancellations
LESSONS LEARNED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities such as nature journaling – slow activities where people create individually and then share together – provide meeting opportunities for people with slower, deeper social connection preferences



COMMUNITY-INTEGRATED ACTIVITIES

Trivia at the Lighthouse (weekly)

Trivia at the Lighthouse Pub was the only existing local activity that Connect Up 2617 integrated into and was a reasonable success. Every Tuesday night the Project Team booked a table at the Lighthouse for Tuesday Trivia.

Two Community Connectors (which went down to one, and then a Volunteer) hosted the table and registrations were taken for those who wanted to play Trivia but didn't know enough people to have a team. Trivia attracted regular, repeat participation (between five and eight people a week).

ENABLERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of age-appropriate local activity • Trivia a useful activity to become familiar with others without pressure of personal questions
CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of consistency in registrations and attendance meant booking numbers for a table was guesswork
LESSONS LEARNED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration with community activities by including a Community Connector or facilitator is useful for people who are on their own, however local activities such as this were infrequent/hard to find in Belconnen and Bruce

ACTIVITIES

KEY FACTORS FOR SOCIAL CONNECTION SUCCESS

The activities revealed several critical success factors for fostering social connection:

Frequency and regularity emerged as paramount. Weekly activities like badminton, board games, and Sip n Stitch achieved strong repeat participation, while monthly or irregular events struggled to build momentum and deeper connections. Participants needed consistent opportunities to develop relationships over time.

Low pressure, low barriers to entry including non-competitive, social, welcoming environments with minimal skill requirements encouraged participation; free food and refreshments (pizza, coffee) removed financial obstacles, while casual formats allowed people to join anytime without pressure.

Interpersonal elements

Skilled facilitation made a significant difference. Enthusiastic Community Connectors and Volunteers who genuinely enjoyed the activities created inclusive, easy-going cultures. They gently enforced structure (like ice-breakers or round-robin play in badminton), welcomed newcomers, and fostered conversation without being heavy-handed.

Alignment and shared experience helped people connect. Activities worked best when participants shared common ground – whether age, life stage (parents with babies), interests (crafts, games), or goals (skill development). Joint activities and exercise naturally facilitated lighter, wider connections.

Appropriate activity-connection matching was crucial. Slower, creative activities (nature journaling, crafts) suited people preferring deep connection in small groups, while active pursuits (badminton, board games) facilitated broader networks. Music gigs were not as successful because attendees prioritised the music/performance over meeting people.

Community-level elements

Some supportive venues and partnerships enabled sustainability. Venues like Qure offered discounts and embraced quiet-night traffic, while the Belconnen Community Centre provided accessible space. Partner organisations provided legitimacy and resources.

Community ownership and leadership strengthened engagement. Volunteer-led initiatives like The Hearth thrived because participants were invested from the start. Activities imposed from outside (like the Community Garden) struggled without an existing committed cohort.

Sustainability

Resource efficiency determined sustainability. Low-effort, low-cost activities could maintain weekly schedules, while resource-intensive events (markets, outdoor expeditions) proved unsustainable at the frequency needed for connection-building.

Activities that combined multiple elements – exercise plus socialising plus food, or skill development plus inclusive culture plus regular scheduling – were most successful at creating meaningful social connections.



ACTIVITIES

KEY CHALLENGES

A range of challenges arose throughout the project which are useful to consider for similar approaches for this age range:

Promotion and registration challenges affected recruitment across the board. Finding the right promotional channels and encouraging people to participate, particularly on their own, remained a challenge despite significant investment in communication and marketing. The ratio of registrations vs. attendance did improve over the life of the project, but early stages saw around 50% attendance from Humanitix registrations which made planning difficult. Reaching diverse audiences in a complex communication environment proved challenging.

Irregular timing and inconsistent scheduling undermined connection-building in some activities. When workshops or events lacked continuity between sessions, participants were discouraged from returning, and deeper connections were more difficult to form. Monthly frequencies proved insufficient for building social bonds.

Resource intensity versus participation created sustainability issues. For example outdoor walks required substantial effort for transport, safety coordination, and weekend staffing but attracted only three to eight participants. The Twilight Markets demanded unfeasible amounts of time, money, and resources for the attendance achieved. The community garden needed constant tending, increasing costs without generating social connection.

Venue limitations constrained several activities. Finding suitable local spaces that were accessible, low-cost, and appropriately sized for connection proved difficult in Belconnen and Bruce. For example, the community garden's remote location away from public transport and parking hindered community involvement; Belco Sounds struggled to find consistent venues with the right atmosphere.

Attendance variability and lack of commitment impacted some activities. Music gigs saw no returning participants and no one attending alone. Cook & Connect's monthly schedule wasn't frequent enough to build momentum. Sometimes, registration inconsistencies at trivia made planning difficult.

Some misalignment between activity purpose and participant motivation caused some challenges. For example, people attended music events for the performance, not to meet others. They came with existing friends rather than seeking new connections, making these events ineffective for social connection goals.

Safety and logistical requirements were a consideration for activities and participation that sometimes proved limiting. For example, cooking together raised WH&S issues that restricted group sizes; outdoor activities required First Aid training and safety expertise. Weather forced cancellations of one or two nature journaling sessions.

Lack of existing community buy-in undermined initiatives imposed from outside. For example, the community garden failed to engage students because no committed cohort was identified and involved from the start, as was the case with Belco Sounds. Without community ownership, activities struggled to gain traction regardless of staff investment.

STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS

Connect Up 2617 was developed in collaboration with community from the start, through the co-design process.

The establishment of the Working Group was the first step in the co-design, to help scope out the consultation and identify key stakeholders.

The Connect Up 2617 Advisory Group was then formed to advise and support the delivery of the project and met quarterly throughout. The Advisory Group was invaluable in giving advice on local approaches, as well as marketing and promotion, together with feedback on evaluation strategies.

In final reflections on the project³⁶, Advisory Group members noted the following:

- Connect Up 2617 raised awareness that few programs exist locally for young people.
- Cultural and mindset change in business and organisations doesn't happen overnight.
- Apart from some notable exceptions, businesses were not the activity drivers for Connect Up 2617 that was originally anticipated.
- Businesses needed to be more encouraged to buy into Connect Up 2617 as a credible brand/movement; the Group believed there was a lack of proactivity from business stakeholders to engage 18-30s without Connect Up 2617.
- More conversations were needed with businesses to help them rethink their models. These relationships needed to become more "two-way" rather than one-directional.

Perspectives on the effectiveness of the Advisory Group itself was that:

- Meetings were impactful and enlightening.
- The Advisory Group was useful for diversity of views and different community perspectives, and provided members with new contacts, resources and opportunities for learning from one another.
- Time and engagement remain challenges – not many people can commit.
- It was important to maintain the Advisory Group and recruit more members, as people get pulled into other commitments/priorities. This included inviting more diverse voices (e.g. disability community representation) and Volunteers.
- Establish better connections between Advisory Group and Community Connectors.
- Switch between in-person and online meetings to increase participation.
- Having Connectors present in meetings was valuable to ground the discussion in reality.
- Built community among Advisory Group members themselves.

Other local stakeholders (or lessors/owners of community assets) were approached to host or partner with Connect Up 2617 in making activities more accessible to people aged 18-30s. Acknowledging that the local context was difficult and the environment tough in terms of COVID impacts, costs of living and changed consumer behaviours, local venues supported Connect Up 2617 how they could.

CASE STUDY QURE BAR AND GRILL

Qure Bar and Grill, based in Bruce, hosted a range of Connect Up 2617 activities after being approached by both a Community Connector and a Volunteer to support. Upfront, Qure was supportive, offering 20% discount on food and drinks for Social Board Games, providing free meals to Volunteers, setting aside tables for Social Board Games and supporting Volunteer ideas for activities such as Craft in Common: Sip n Stitch, Halloween nights and Crafteoke.

“...so after being with Connect Up, we have definitely become a lot more community focused ... we're also organising more events with other people ... we just want to have a casual place that people can come have a drink, hot food, and just a relaxing environment. So just to feel comfortable.”

(Steve, Bar Manager)





CASE STUDY

CONNECTING APARTMENT RESIDENTS IN BELCONNEN

“I wouldn’t say I felt connected to a community of people. Whereas I think now ... I’m hopeful that the community will be a more fun place to live. But also a warmer place to live.”

Oracle Apartments in Belconnen comprises 479 units across seven buildings, one of several high-rise apartment complexes in the area. Following a presentation to the Belconnen Alliance of High-living Apartments (BAHA) in early 2024, Connect Up 2617 partnered with Oracle’s Executive Committee to foster social connection between residents. Previous one-off events had attracted minimal participation. In March 2025, two residents from High Society – a 541-apartment building – approached Connect Up 2617 for similar support in generating community through regular dinners.

At Oracle, the project trialled regular fortnightly outdoor BBQs in a central green area, starting October 2024. An embedded resident Community Connector, working with the Executive Committee, organised three BBQs and an End of Year potluck party which attracted 26 residents, more than any other activity previously run by the Executive Committee. Connect Up 2617 provided food and games, creating easy entry points for participation. The Oracle Community Connector collaborated closely with the Executive Committee Chair, posting regularly on the Oracle Facebook group and conducting walks with residents to understand their needs. For events, flyers were distributed in letterboxes, foyers, and the sports centre, with posters displayed throughout common areas.

At High Society, Connect Up 2617 supported residents to establish fortnightly dinners from April 2025, initially providing food before transitioning to a potluck format to increase investment and personal engagement. High Society residents led their own promotion with Connect Up 2617 guidance on success factors.

The Oracle BBQs attracted good participation and resulted in nine residents forming a core group now self-organising board game nights, group coffees, and cycling groups.

The Community Connector role proved crucial, with residents saying that the Connector “*essentially relieves some of the burden of making these initial connections ... this creates that invitation*”.

High Society dinners attracted 8-15 residents fortnightly throughout 2025, with many residents participating in the end of year dinner. Volunteer organisers stated they enjoyed the dinners “*because we feel like we’ve achieved that goal of being part of the fabric of the place that we live*”.

They also believed they would likely be far more proactive in the future if they wanted community: that they’d be “*far more inclined to, you know, start holding barbecues or have dinners or, you know, invite people out for coffee or whatever*”.

COMMUNICATION AND PROMOTION

Reaching 18 to 30-year-olds in Belconnen and Bruce presented a significant communications challenge, requiring broad promotion for face-to-face activities while targeting a specific cohort in a small geographic area amid a complex communications environment. The strategy needed to maintain engagement while connecting participants to the project's larger goals of improving social connection and empowering individuals. For many regular participants, joining activities was rooted in understanding the program's purpose to support emerging adults with social connection.

Connect Up 2617 employed a mix of traditional and digital approaches. Participants identified word of mouth as the most significant information source (298 responses), followed by flyers and posters (91), social media (77), the Connect Up website (50), and Belco Buzz e-newsletter (44). Interviews revealed several informal "super connectors" among participants, Volunteers, and Connectors who contributed significantly to word-of-mouth promotion.

Communication methods

Printed materials proved highly effective, particularly posters in local cafes and bus stops, and flyers in university buildings and apartment complexes. Targeted posters and printable fortnightly calendars worked well, with A-frames drawing attention from passers-by. However, a suburb-wide letterbox drop was unsuccessful.

Engagement events celebrating milestones like the project's first anniversary or themed events such as Christmas in July fostered loyalty and belonging among Connectors, regular participants, and community members. Targeted outreach through UC and CIT student channels, accommodation services, and wellbeing teams attracted new participants.

Social media was crucial but required time to build community. The team developed a social media framework to maintain a balance between informing, inspiring action and building community³⁷. Instagram proved most successful, reaching 600 followers by project end. Connectors shaped age-appropriate content, moving away from heavily branded corporate material toward hand-drawn graphics and colloquial language. The social media following grew through event attendance and encouraged repeat participation, helping create a local sense of community.

The activity-centred website, launched in January 2025, addressed the gap in awareness about local activities for emerging adults. It provided an activity calendar and facilitated Volunteer inquiries. Plans to expand with community asset mapping were explored but faced limitations around software requirements (ArcGIS), skills, and maintenance needs.

Belco Buzz e-newsletter, launched in December 2024, provided weekly activity listings, reminders, project insights, and local information. Over 500 people subscribed within the first year. Humanitix served as the booking platform and primary activity information source, with newsletter subscription prompts at checkout driving subscription growth.

Key learnings

Social media requires consistent organic posting for sustained growth and visibility. Stories fuelled reach and follower growth, with 24-hour activity reminders particularly valued by participants. Instagram reels consistently outperformed static posts, focusing on people, activities, and behind-the-scenes content. Collaborations and tagging across accounts expanded reach. Organic reach alone proved insufficient – boosted Facebook posts and ads increased visibility but required pairing with tailored organic strategies to maximise investment.

Closed Instagram groups and messaging apps like WhatsApp maintained conversation flow between activities and encouraged ongoing participation. A key challenge was low engagement rates despite high view counts – posts attracted attention but didn't consistently inspire action.

The project initially envisioned Connectors driving social media promotion but found this unsuccessful. Connectors preferred not to adopt "promotional" roles that might distance them from participants. The team's assumption that all emerging adults are comfortable creating and sharing social media content proved incorrect, so specialist videographers and social media agencies were engaged at points throughout the project to build a library of approved content.

Successful communication required ongoing specialist support for content generation, website development, email marketing, event platform updates, and Meta backend management for paid ads. The project demonstrated that effective communication with this demographic requires sustained professional expertise combined with authentic, community-driven engagement.

PROJECT OUTCOMES AND FINDINGS

AS A RESULT OF CONNECT UP 2617*:

Respondents reported statistically significant positive changes in their feelings about lacking companionship (+32.25%) feeling isolated from others (+36.25%) and feeling left out (32.5%) before and after Connect Up 2617 (based on UCLA 3-Item Loneliness Scale⁴¹).

**Final survey: 86 respondents*

OVER **70%** HAD MORE FRIENDS THEY CONNECT WITH MONTHLY

ALMOST **50%** HAD MORE FRIENDS THEY COULD RELY ON FOR HELP

OVER **75%** FELT PART OF A LIKE-MINDED GROUP

NEARLY **90%** REPORTED IMPROVED BELONGING THROUGH CONNECT UP 2617

IMPACTS ON LONELINESS AND SOCIAL CONNECTION

The impacts of Connect Up 2617 on participants ranged from deep personal changes to a higher-level sense of belonging and community connectedness. Those who were more involved – such as Community Connectors, Volunteers and regular participants – reported deeper or more profound impacts.

Personal growth, personal capacity building, social stamina

A significant theme in discussions with Connectors, Volunteers and participants was the personal growth and benefits they gained from Connect Up 2617.

Reflections on personal growth were wide-ranging, from an increased awareness of others and how they were benefiting from the program, increased sociability, willingness to try new things, “get out there” and talk to a range of people, to increased social “stamina” or “social muscle” in sociability, increased confidence and a sense of hope and optimism.

“I think it’s definitely helped me build up confidence in social scenarios, because you just have to do it once you’re there ... I think yeah, it’s good for building up that sort of social stamina.”

Some participants from diverse backgrounds were surprised at the level of sociability they experienced with locals, and for others even if the program didn’t result in friendships, they were hopeful it still would, demonstrating resilience and optimism.

“I always hope for that connection to keep going and – what do you call it – bloom into a friendship.”

The conversations revealed an enhanced capacity of these participants to engage in seeking or engaging in social connection as a result of Connect Up 2617.

“that’s given me confidence to go – hey, people actually like me. Some people actually find me funny. Those things are – just make me feel like – yeah, gives me more confidence to go out and socialise a bit more.”

“That’s a big change for me, like I never imagined I could speak to Australian like that comfortably, like I speak to an Indian.”

Community Connectors and Volunteers highlighted particularly profound aspects of personal growth through the program including skills development, empowerment and autonomy and increased confidence in a range of domains, including social confidence in initiating social activities for others.

“because I feel more confident generally in my abilities, I’m like, ‘Maybe I can apply for a job. Why the hell not? Of course, I’ve worked. I can do this. I can do this.’”

“I think if we had a similar thought in the future about, oh, there’s not much community, I think we’d be far more inclined to, you know, start holding barbecues or have dinners or, you know, invite people out for coffee or whatever.”

There was also a sense of new beginnings in some Volunteers that Connect Up 2617 had provided an opportunity for a life refresh.

“For me, this was a big step. Yes, I’ve done all of this kind of stuff before a gazillion times over, but actually it wasn’t recently, and I’d lost the idea that I could even function in society again. Yes, it has made a huge difference for me. So being given a platform with no pressure, all of the support, my personal story connecting with the project, all of that, me just being able to do that has actually pushed me forward in all these different areas of my life.”

Connect Up 2617 facilitated social connection sociability, companionship

Many participants went into the program with expectations, and many experienced functional, practical benefits to their sociability and social connections. These participants were clear about the role that social connection needed to and did play in their lives and about the benefits afforded by Connect Up 2617 and were more pragmatic about what they may or may not get out of the program. They found companionship, sociability and had fun but also reaped functional benefits – such as knowing neighbours for safety, not having to rely on work colleagues for friendships, or just being around people because it made them feel better – that were distinct to the deeper, more emotional benefits derived by others.

“if I needed to message the group chat and be like, sorry guys, left the door open. Can you come over? Can you come upstairs? ... I feel maybe, like now I’m not on my own so much.”

“I think it made my social networks a bit more flexible because I have a couple of avenues now for me to be social in. So that just means I’m not reliant on one system.”

“it has been very positive for me in terms of that, meeting new people, making friends, and having a diverse array of connections.”

“I’ve just started a new job and I think if I went into it being like, I need to make friends because I don’t know anyone there, it would put a lot more pressure on how I introduce myself to these new people ... but having that base, I don’t know, put less pressure on it and ... made me more confident in that, like, oh, if it doesn’t happen, it doesn’t happen.”

This may relate to the level of the investment and expectations of these participants, as well as their existing levels of loneliness and need for social connection. In this context, for these participants, the fact that these friendships may be contained to Connect Up 2617 activities was not an issue.

“I think seeing someone once or twice a week, like maybe we don’t see them outside of the Connect Up activities, not because they’re not good friends, but because I think as working adults and stuff, like I work full time and study full time, so I am pressed for time.”

Creating Community: Friendships, community, deep connection

The participants who experienced Connect Up 2617 at the deepest level were the regular participants who came along to one regular activity or more throughout the year; Volunteers; and the Community Connectors. The very regular participants noted the small friendship groups created through Connect Up 2617 that extended beyond Connect Up activities, some even travelling together or creating other activities such as coffee morning or board game nights.

“we do like hang out outside of Connect Up and we have a crew that sometimes we go out to the bar on a Friday, which is nice.”

“Maybe what this is supposed to be is the little group of seven people going for a coffee on a Saturday and you know, a little group of six people playing some games on a Wednesday and then somebody needs to go to the hospital and they call their neighbour and they’re like, hey, you know, thank you so much for that.”

“I’m really glad that I’ve impacted some people to kind of come together. I’m not like a billionaire or something, so I can’t really provide people with a bunch of money, but the people that I’ve managed to reach in terms of connection I think have gotten a lot from it.”

SOCIAL CONNECTION CAN BE DAUNTING: CONNECT UP 2617 WAS A CRUCIAL, SAFE FIRST STEP

Invitation to and permission to connect

The very existence of Connect Up 2617 created the permission for local people to connect with each other, removing the awkwardness of people seeking connection if they were unsure if it was reciprocated. There was a safety for participants knowing that everyone who came along to the activities was seeking some form of social connection, ensuring that initial barrier was removed and they could enter the interaction with more confidence.

“this creates opportunity for people to engage in a way where they don’t feel awkward. They’re like, oh, OK, in this circumstance, it’s all right if I talk to somebody as opposed to, oh, I don’t want to bother that person. They might be busy. They might not like me, and they might not be interested in making a friend ... this kind of gives people that gentle push where like minded people can be like, OK ... this is a setting where I can make that connection.”

“to get those initial things started you need somebody who can sort of push it.”

“These days, people don’t want to go talk to a stranger without there being like a reason to talk to somebody ... you either have to have a reason or an invitation. And this creates that invitation.”

Personal/social challenges: First steps are hard

A significant challenge recognised by participants was the nature of the project itself – providing the space, opportunity and support for people to connect who may find that connection difficult. First steps in socialising can be confronting for anyone, but even more so for those who are lonely or disconnected or who experience cultural barriers, financial difficulties or have busy schedules. These, combined with the default of staying home, can lead to complacency or fear in taking that first step out.

“people kind of just click and talk to each other organically. And sometimes, if English is not your first language, it’s hard to kind of suddenly mingle with people.”

“it gets really isolating, not having that opportunity to meet new faces and do new things and you end up just staying in your lane like everyone else.”

“The first step is always harder. I’ve told a couple of people that it’s hard. It’s hard for the first time, but one day when they feel like okay, I should get out of it, and they know Connect Up is already there, they could go.”

If first steps towards social connection are hard, participants saw it as important that the process was as easy as possible. A constant recurring theme among participants was the ease of low-pressure, non-competitive free activities together with the relief of social pressure – that Connect Up 2617 provided that first responsibility-free step.

“it is a really good icebreaker ... because you can walk in there and almost be taken care of, which is usually the big challenge when it comes to breaking into a different social activity.”

Connect Up 2617 as social threshold

For many participants, Connect Up 2617 played a more important role in their social connection landscape. They spoke about their previous loneliness or isolation, and the fact that Connect Up 2617 had become a component of their lives and an instrumental part of getting them to the first stage of being social. Some talked about finding socialising difficult or absorbing themselves in work or study leaving little room for friendships outside. For these participants, Connect Up 2617 was a social feature that they wanted to continue.

“I guess I only met this group quite recently. I didn’t really have, like, friends in Belconnen before these people.”

“personally, I’m an introvert and my work really requires me to be quite sociable and I would, I would say if it’s not the Connect Up event I would usually just chill at home, have my, you know, me time.”

“before I sign up, I feel very lonely at home. But after I attending this kind of activity, it make me happier – make me very happy.”

“cause I haven’t gotten anything that’s ongoing other than Connect Up socially at the moment.”

First steps in new friendships

Some participants didn't find new friends or networks as such but they felt that they had started on the process with Connect Up 2617.

"I can feel like the beginnings of new friendships and connections being formed. I don't feel like I'm at the point where it's like I'm friends with anyone outside of those groups."

"I think at the moment it's enough for me to see them at badminton, but maybe down the track ... I mean, I've only been there like maybe five times or so ... so maybe down the track I may say hey, we have other joint interests and maybe we can organise something after."

A constant recurring theme among participants was the ease of low-pressure, non-competitive free activities. Aligned with this was the relief of social pressure, the feeling of someone else taking responsibility for social success, the ease of taking part in something that was easy and organised by others. This relates to the first step being provided by Connect Up 2617.

"I think it's just really refreshing to have a social opportunity that hasn't got drama involved, because when people try to organise this themselves on Facebook and all these different groups, there's usually a level of drama ... this feels a lot friendlier."

"it is a really good icebreaker ... because you can walk in there and almost be taken care of, which is usually the big challenge when it comes to breaking into a different social activity."

LOW SOCIAL RISK, LOW PRESSURE, LOW BARRIERS TO ENTRY, CONVENIENCE IS KEY

A dominant theme throughout the survey, interviews, conversation groups and anecdotal feedback was the appeal of low-risk, low-stakes, low-pressure activities, as well as low barriers to entry. This was not only financial – as people could turn up, or not, and would not be bound or penalised for irregular attendance – it was social and emotional. The culture was relaxed and non-competitive. Activities were free of charge. The participants did not carry responsibility of facilitating social events or of them not going as well as planned; they contributed but did not lead. This combination of factors was appealing and conducive to relaxed participation and for creating cultural environments conducive to social connection.

"I wanted the social element of it that is not too serious, and just to meet some new people and to do something every Wednesday."

"it's free and it's booked and somebody else is handling it, handling the booking. So it's just yeah, everything is done for us."

"People are there to get points but it's not people who are super-duper competitive. I like that vibe."

The low-pressure aspect also related to the low social risk of taking part in activities that participants didn't organise and didn't facilitate. Participants were attracted by the fact that activities were social, facilitated, and they didn't have to wear the outcomes if the activity didn't go well socially or logistically.

"I think just having a kind of structured activity takes out the ... mental energy of both planning something but also the kind of fear and worry of, you know what, if no one comes or what if I put myself out there and then, you know, no-one wants to engage, it takes that out. So you can just kind of show up."

"It's just it's a good way to socialise because if it's not, it's not putting like too much pressure on to socialise because you can always just fall back on the sport."

This, together with the casual nature of the activities, were a big drawcard. The fact they were free was an incentive, as was the fact that although activities were regular you could drop in and out, didn't need to subscribe for terms or extended sessions and could "just turn up", and were local and easy to get to.

"...the fact that it was very, very casual ... I like that it was easy to kind of fit in and to come and if you're late, it doesn't matter."

"It was described as a casual, non-competitive social activity, so that encouraged me too."

"it's not serious, it's actually a lot of fun, and a lot of people, everyone that I know that is there is under the same impression that it is just for fun."

"I think that (being free) is a factor that draws me in, because I'm not having to make any commitments."

"where I work, it's very corporate ... but whenever I attend like these (activities) all these things are very hands-on and there's not really an expectation to do something amazingly good. You almost can fail and do something really strange, and just put that aside and talk to people."

"People are not very judgmental. They don't take themselves too seriously."

MULTI-DIMENSIONAL ASPECTS FOR SOCIALLY-CONNECTIVE ACTIVITIES

There were a wide range of factors canvassed by participants that they felt made Connect Up 2617 accessible and useful for them from a social connections perspective. These ranged from the practical to the more intangible elements that arose from the purposeful structure of the program for 18-30s locally, and its supporting activities and human resources. Although they are teased out separately below, these elements integrated and reinforced each other throughout the year to evolve into a multi-faceted program. The integration of these elements and the particular features they created together, or revealed, are drawn together in the Findings section.

Peer Community Connectors as peer “social catalysts”

Peers who reflected their community

The Community Connectors and Volunteers were diverse with a variety of skillsets and interests, life experiences, professional and educational backgrounds. Participants recognised that diversity as reflecting their community which helped create a welcoming space that they were also a part of.

“I just really feel like they’re just friends rather than coordinators.”

“all the facilitators, they come from very different ethnic as well as sexual orientation backgrounds. And that creates a welcoming space, I think, for people and other people of similar backgrounds as well ‘cause there’s such diversity. You can see that straightaway.”

Organisation and social facilitation

The Community Connectors were a key feature of the Connect Up 2617 activities and program, supported by some Volunteers who also became a part of the team and developed their own activities and communities (notably The Hearth and Sip n Stitch, both craft-focussed initiatives). They played a multitude of roles throughout the year which were recognised and appreciated by participants. These ranged from the practical aspects of organising activities such as booking tables for Trivia in the pub or setting up badminton courts – because “someone needs to take the lead to organise” – to socially facilitating discussions and ensuring those who were on their own or first-timers were looked after.

“no one was left out and she was listening to everybody and she was kind of like welcoming everyone and then everyone could talk to each other.”

“I think they were focusing on the introverted people to encourage them to talk more, to have more activity, to come more, and they did their best to do this.”

Reducing pressure of socialising: Welcomes, setting behavioural norms

The social pressure of people meeting others or maintaining conversations was made “less daunting” by the Connectors and the regular Volunteers, with participants noting they were “social catalysts” who supported those who found socialising more difficult, helped people break into social groups and welcomed participants in – which could be the challenging aspects of social interactions – and helped set behavioural norms of friendliness and inclusivity. They also absorbed the pressure of social organisation and possible failure.

“the connector essentially relieves some of the burden of making initial connections because at the end of the day, people are like, oh, it might not be that great. Might not be that good. Is it worth the effort?”

“I mean it’s a good, friendly culture, which starts, I guess, from the connectors and moves out throughout the group.”

Alignment with others: Common ground

Many participants talked about the feeling of alignment or commonality with others, on a range of levels. This was created at the first stage with the permission to connect, given the existence of the program, creating a crucially important awareness for participants – that there are other people out there who also were seeking companionship or friendship, or who may be struggling.

“it just makes you realise that we’re all people, we’re all the same, we’re going through the same ups and downs. Whereas I feel like in study and work, sometimes that can get real lost.”

“that helped open my eyes that no, there are other people who are feeling like the same.”

This was reinforced by other factors that helped create common ground for participants before they even started connecting: that they were in the same 18-30s age group; that they were local, or in cases of the apartments, hyperlocal; that they were interested in the same things, whether that be badminton, art and crafts, community gardening or board games; and in the case of some of the population-specific activities, that they were in the same life circumstance, whether that be study or parenting. These factors, together with the culture and safety created by the Community Connectors and Volunteers, helped create a sense of security and alignment for many of the participants, which supported the social connection process.

“like a safe environment was just having everyone that you know, like we’re all kind of like in the learning curve.”

“just knowing, is what my baby’s doing normal? Is what my body’s doing normal? Just being able to talk to people about those things I think really helps.”

“it’s hard to describe the vibe, but ... just you feel like you’re on the same page.”

Activity diversity and structured flexibility

Diversity of activities

The range and diversity of activities was highlighted by many participants as a major factor in their participation in and enjoyment of Connect Up 2617. Being person-centred was the core of these activities, as participants then saw they could find an option that suited their interest, social connection preference or motivation and schedule, and hopefully find other similar people through these shared elements.

“I do like that there’s a variety of activities that Connect Up people do so because, like, not everyone has a baby for social strolling and not everyone lives in the apartment complex.”

Some noted that they could find a range of benefits in the one activity – to meet new and different people with different backgrounds and viewpoints and learn new skills or practise existing skills. They also noted the person-centred nature of activities and culture which meant that you could come as you are and take part in ways that suited you.

“meeting in like different spaces as well kept it interesting. Because, no offence, if we were always just standing around the barbecue I would get a bit bored with that.”

“we all sit together in a big round long table. You can listen to whatever. If you probably have nothing to say, you can still listen. Everybody is connected right at the end.”

Activities for differing social connection motivations and preferences

Although the Connect Up 2617 activities were originally developed or integrated into community with common interests in mind – whether that be sports or arts and crafts – it emerged that the activities supported social connection in a range of ways that were all highlighted by participants. The activities provided both a portal and a support for social connection, making the business of connecting more peripheral and lower pressure. They opened the door for deeper connection, particularly if they were held regularly, or if they were “slower” type activities such as crafting or nature journaling.

“That’s why I think board games is really good because you can focus on playing a game and don’t feel pressured to make like small talk conversations with people.”

“I think bringing people together to do something takes the pressure off.”

“The art is like a doorway to open about – yeah, personal issues or feelings within that you don’t really share sometimes at work because it’s too vulnerable or it’s not professional.”

Participants also noted that people had different social connection preferences or needs, and the activities served (or matched) these. For example, participants noted that badminton attracted more outgoing participants who were happy to talk with a range of people seeking a wider network of friends, or that slower or smaller activities attracted people who might want deeper connection or who found larger groups daunting.

“I know there are some people that went to the board games that were quite so – a bit more like closed in, and then a book club, they’re like a bit more open. So, it’s maybe more of where they’re comfortable as well.”

“I’m not a surface-level person. I’ll do the pleasantries, but I find it quite draining. I like it in context, but I highlight my friendships to be quite more meaningful ... the nature journaling signals to other like-souled people that it’s safe to talk about the deep stuff.”

“For introverts, it can be particularly difficult because it’s very draining to be social. But this activity for that specific demographic of quite quiet people, who also need deep connection, not just bubbly, busy connection, this is a way to access it with like-minded people.”

Intentional, structured flexibility

Participants discussed a range of characteristics of the Connect Up 2617 activities that, together, create a picture of both structure and looseness and flexibility that, together with the peer Community Connectors and Volunteers, created a social ecosystem that was both supported and safe and felt person-centred. Primary among these was that the activities were regular and low-cost or free. Frequent regularity and low-cost or free was key – people knew they could rely on their catchups happening every week and they could drop in or out without penalty, and that they could get to know others over time.

“Having regular attendance helps ... kind of getting to know people across a longer period. And yeah, seeing the kind of, you know, the ups and downs and being able to talk about vulnerabilities.”

Participants also noted that activities were accessible in terms of time (outside work hours) and locale; were loosely structured in terms of Community Connector support, icebreakers and social facilitation techniques where appropriate, but were flexible and responsive enough to respond to participants needs or the vibe of a group on given occasions; were well organised, which relieved the participants of pressure of wondering what was happening; and often evolved into other connection methods such as Whatsapp or Instagram groups which helped in terms of practical updates and deeper connection.

“The ice breakers ... I like that it really made you make an effort. And I think just everyone doing a task that gives them a bit of autonomy, it leads to conversation like, oh, why'd you go with that or where did this come from or what inspired this?”

“what I really like is that on the courts, if you want to play competitively, there'll be a person to play competitively with. And if you want to just have a relaxing rally, then there'll be people to rally with as well. So I feel like you can get, you can scratch the itch, whatever it is.”

“I think it's the structure which encourages the conviviality.”

Participants also noted that the intentionality of the activities around social connection, although not overt, was helpful.

“people are there to connect with other people and to create friendships; whereas, some other things you go to, it's like, oh, they're already a group and I feel I'm imposing on the group.”

“I feel like everyone's kind of already come in, open to chat, open to get to know each other, which has helped that people have gone in with the attitude that they want to connect rather than it be a group of like awkward people together.”

The fact that the program was structured and run by an organisation like UC also provided a sense of structure, trust and safety for participants; the lack of an alcohol focus was also noted.

“Like it's tough when something doesn't feel structured. Like Connect Up ... it feels like there's weight behind it rather than it's up in the air or like come meet here and do this activity ... I think a lot of people are already intimidated to showing up to these new events that if it doesn't feel structured.”

“I don't really drink. I do go to bars and stuff, but I don't really drink. I think it did help that a lot of these events didn't have alcohol ... I think that does help kind of weed out certain characters ... if that was the regular it might be a different crowd.”

CARE AND RECIPROCITY: OPEN INCLUSIVE CULTURES A PRE-CONDITION FOR SOCIAL CONNECTION

Many participants highlighted the inclusive, warm culture or “vibe” of the activities as being key to their ongoing participation. Features of this culture noted by participants included openness to others; inclusiveness; an unforced, organic feeling of people being together; comfort and familiarity; good personal dynamics between Connectors, Volunteers and participants, and care and respect.

“There’s a certain tone. It’s hard for me to totally describe it. There’s a way that I think specifically the organisers, but then maybe it has – I don’t know to what extent, but it’s a bit of the culture as well of like, you come and you can just be there and that’s all you need to do.”

Many participants noted the egalitarian nature of the gatherings – that there were no social hierarchies, there was people were all in together, either working together on something (such as arts or crafts) or sharing enjoyment of sport, with a shared recognition that they were there for some form of social connection. Participants mentioned that there were no standards to be met and “not much expectation except just like be nice to people”, and that it was OK to participate in ways that felt right for them; some used the word “wholesome” to describe the activities (particularly The Hearth).

“everyone’s all like, everyone’s very inclusive which I think probably plays quite a big role in that. Everyone’s very nice. No one’s really excluded from anything.”

“It had the same energy as people who were like, “I run for my mental health. I run as a way of making sure I have good sleep.” I felt like the social equivalent to that.”

Same culture, different people

Participants noted the benefits of knowing that participants at activities wouldn’t always stay the same – that there are enough core participants to maintain culture and continuity, but that new people could always join, move in and out, which meant exposure to a range of different and new people. This equated to new opportunities for connections and friendships and exposure to a diversity of people, still in the safe framework of a consistent culture.

“it was like a good mixture of people from different backgrounds. So you get to, like learn about different like people in the conversations you had were like, really authentic.”

“We’re not always doing the same thing and it’s also quite often a different group of people. Like you’ve got some regulars, but it’s also meeting new people each week.”

“I actually got to, I think, meet a lot of people outside of my friendship groups that I would usually encounter.”



TEAM COHESION AND PERSONAL IMPACTS FOR COMMUNITY CONNECTORS AND VOLUNTEERS

Community Connectors

By project end, the Community Connectors were a group of six and were a friendly and cohesive group. They felt that the role itself was a strength of the Connect Up 2617 project, particularly that the Connectors reflected the targeted community through their age and diversity.

Their perspectives on the project process had improved markedly from the first interviews in 2024, when the team composition was different and team dynamics were not as positive or supportive. After staffing changes, with some departures and new additions, Connectors became more familiar with their roles and more confident in offering ideas, feedback and opinions in team meetings. The team became more equitable and dynamic, attending training and socialising together.

“A takeaway for me is ... community is actually going out there and getting things done and meeting and doing the real work ... it's not about sitting back and planning. I think planning can be done with anybody. And like the main part of building a community is connections and those connections cannot be built through one event or just being there once, it's a constant effort that we have built and made through over a year that we have right now. So community needs constant, you know, touching base with it, making sure you're there for the community and understanding that development only starts when people feel you're a part of the community, not somebody who is outside it.”

Volunteers

The Volunteer team grew to seven throughout the project, with Volunteers:

- supporting activities through expertise (Social Badminton, Sip n Stitch)
- driving activities to share skills and build community (The Hearth, Sip n Stitch, Nature Journaling)
- driving activities to build micro-communities (High Society Apartments).

Over 15 Volunteers signed up at the end of the project to ensure that activities and Connect Up 2617 were maintained, reflecting the strength of the communities developed.

“I definitely feel valued ... with a few months of working with Connect Up, I did realise that there's never gonna be a perfect solution for things, and that volunteering in community is more about listening, and culture and language brought in together.”

“I feel so loved, I really do.”

Although not all Volunteers made strong friendships though Connect Up 2617, they highlighted the rewards of helping others create friendships and connections and the joy of creating or facilitating community.

They experienced other profound personal outcomes which are discussed in this report. Some did make strong friendships that extended well beyond Connect Up 2617 activities and which they knew would continue beyond the life of the program.

“I've made some lifelong friendships as well, which will be beautiful.”



BARRIERS, CHALLENGES, FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Program design and environment: Complexity

In reflecting on the operating environment of Connect Up 2617, participants noted a variety of challenges, as well as issues to consider in the program design of a community initiative such as this. These include the complexity of the communications environment, and the difficulty in reaching and involving younger people with various media consumption habits or networks, who may be isolated, and who have wildly differing schedules.

“I really wanted to join the dance one, dance fitness one, but I have regular shifts at that time.”

They noted that not all activities were the same level of accessibility for people on their own – that they wouldn’t go to Belco Sounds on their own, for example (“that’s not somewhere I’d think I’d make friends”) – and that people had different psychosocial needs. Logistically, participants who were involved in organising activities recognised that small barriers could turn into “delays or cancellations” (for example, maintenance men not having screws to put up Connect Up 2617 noticeboards in apartment blocks resulted in weeks-long delays).

Social infrastructure

The suburbs of Bruce and Belconnen in the ACT do, by objective measures, have spaces and facilities that could be considered as solid social infrastructure³⁸ across domains such as health, education, social and community services, sport and recreation, parks and playgrounds – essentially places that bring people together³⁹.

The experiences relayed to Connect Up 2617 by residents aged 18-30s however, as both participants of the consultation process and of the activities, is that these suburbs are not social for this age group.

Frequent mention was made of feelings of urban isolation, “nothing happening” and empty streets. “Pro-connection spaces”⁴⁰ such as third places where people can meet intentionally, “bumping” places where they can meet incidentally, ephemeral places such as pop-ups or fairs, community groups or online and hybrid spaces are in extremely short supply.

The project team found there were limited local social connection opportunities relevant for 18-30s to integrate into, which resulted in the development of many new activities by the team, Connectors and Volunteers. Local organisations active in advocating for better social infrastructure were supportive of Connect Up 2617 including the Belconnen Community Council and the Belconnen Alliance of High-living Apartments (BAHA), with local institutions such as the CIT Student Association (CITSA) particularly engaged. Some local venues were supportive of providing space for young adults to gather and two local bars/pubs provided discounts for participants or Volunteers, however venues providing warm gathering spaces were limited in these suburbs.

Social expectations not met

Some participants felt they didn’t make the depth or type of connections they would have wanted from Connect Up 2617, but were pragmatic about this, saying they were still content with the sociability outcomes of the program regardless. Some maintained hope that they might, in time, meet people who would become friends, recognising that friendships take time, some luck and happenstance, and a quantity of interactions to sift through to find true connections. Some reflected that the process was more difficult due to their own insecurities or desires/expectations for friendship.

“Because we know that really, you have to meet a lot of people to meet your friends, you know.”

“Also, it’s like, we just meet once a week, and not every week you have the same people, right? So maybe, yeah, if we met more frequently, then we, like, develop that connection.”

“probably because sometimes you don’t know if people really want to be friends with you. They like you, not like you, so you don’t really know, maybe then you’re a bit hesitant.”

Training and support for Community Connectors and Volunteers

Although training and support was offered throughout the year of project delivery, it was noted by Community Connectors and some Volunteers that more training in social facilitation, particularly for groups involving socially diverse people or those who were chronically lonely, would have been useful for skills development and to help recharge their ‘social batteries’ which could be drained through regular social facilitation.



DISCUSSION

LONELINESS AND SOCIAL DISCONNECTION FOR 18-30s IS UNIQUE AND MULTI-LAYERED

The complex and multi-factorial aspects of loneliness and social connection among 18-30s were apparent throughout Connect Up 2617 right from the consultation stage, which suggests that these nuances be considered in future community interventions for this cohort. This includes individual and interpersonal challenges specific to this age group as well as their perceptions and experiences of Canberra.

Transition, lack of foundation, closed communities

Participants offered their views of living in Canberra as young people in their 20s or early 30s, highlighting their age as one of transition with existing friendship groups falling away and the impact of differing schedules, particularly with groups such as mothers or full-time workers, and the ongoing alienating impacts of COVID. For some this resulted in not knowing what to do with their loneliness; where to start.

“There’s an appetite for connectedness, but people don’t know what to do with that. They’re like, OK, I want to be friends, but making friends is difficult as an adult.”

It was also recognised that there were many steps to, or dimensions of, social connection, particularly for adults; and that starting, rebuilding or maintaining friendships or social connections requires some luck, purposeful thought and action, as well as patience and confidence in starting small.

“Like, it’s always tough making friends and I think we like to think it’s just like, you know, you just put yourself out there and meet new people and just start conversations. But it can all be so situational and so coincidental.”

“I realised, like, how important it is to reach out to other people ... like reaching out to my doctor ... and like just messaging people. I started off very small.”

Community-level challenges

The particular loneliness of Canberra was noted, particularly cliqueness, transient populations and that many people were from “somewhere else”, siloing of international and domestic communities and the sense that “community” was hidden. Participants reflected people in Canberra tended to focus on work or study, with little interest in extending activities into conversations or socialising.

“as a new immigration to Australia, we don’t like so many local people.”

“maybe it’s just a Canberra thing, people tend to stick to the same clique of friends that they made in high school and in college and they never try to get to know new people.”

“People just go to work and then go home ... there’s no really – there’s no talking after.”

Difficulties in finding out what was happening in Canberra or locally contributed to the sense of isolation – “not knowing what’s going on, you just kind of sit in your bubble of comfort. It’s really bad”.

Participants noted the convenience of Belconnen, the walkability and the beauty of some areas like Lake Ginninderra, as well as the diversity of the population and a student community. They also mentioned the sense of “neglect”, lack of activities to do and the isolating nature of the urban environment.

“Oh, it was terrible. I wanted to cry. I moved from Melbourne to here and there was nothing. Belconnen was so isolated. In terms of the suburb, it was just – it felt like no one could see anyone aside from the mall. It just wasn’t built for connection.”

COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS FOR SOCIAL CONNECTION MUST BE RESPONSIVE, AGILE, AND PEER-LED

The project management style of Connect Up 2617 was responsive and agile, ensuring that the project could pursue opportunities and activities that were working and, if not, could explore reasons why; and could pivot to create new approaches. A key example was the Connect Up 2617 Twilight Markets which were trialled and, further to observations and feedback from those involved, halted due to a realisation that to continue would be expensive and would not achieve the social connection objectives of the project. One of the aspects that did work, however, was the connection between the workshop facilitators themselves, which the Project Team fostered. These offshoots turned out to be effective and successful facilitators of social connection and the genesis of supportive creative communities in The Hearth and Craft in Common: Sip n Stitch.

This community-led approach was effective, as was the key involvement of the project by Community Connectors and regular Volunteers. Feedback on all aspects of the project was regularly sought, considered and, if workable, adopted, creating an equitable project management dynamic that created ownership and commitment from these key stakeholders and staff.

SOCIAL CONNECTION DIMENSIONS SPAN PERSONAL, INTERPERSONAL AND COMMUNITY DOMAINS

Social connection is different for everyone – and participants, Community Connectors, and Volunteers presented a spectrum of social connection needs, motivations for participation and outcomes from the Connect Up 2617 pilot that, together with the diverse project supports and opportunities, help create a nuanced picture of possible social connection approaches at individual/personal, interpersonal and community levels.

Differing social connection needs

Participants noted different approaches and expectations in their quest for social connection ranging from companionship, or just to be in the social space of others; to simply extending existing networks of friends, through to wanting community as they had no existing communities, to knowing that social connection was a fundamental need that was essential for their sense of humanness and mental health.

“I think a lot of the times, people actually just want to be around other people, and have purpose or meaning in that moment.”

“I did try to do just like, oh, just cope with life alone. I did try doing it that way, but it didn't work. It led to some, you know, some very bad moments of my life ... I realised like I'm not an island, even if I want to be.”

Chronically lonely participants highlighted their feelings of isolation and lack of community, where they weren't sure “where to pinpoint my loneliness anymore 'cause you get so used to it”.

Individual level: Social connection is good for me (personal goals, development)

Many participants recognised that they needed social connection, either through personal previous experience with depression or loneliness, or that they simply knew they needed it. These participants dug deep to attend Connect Up 2617 – they talked about pushing themselves out of their comfort zone, building themselves up, being around others because they needed it.

“Originally it was just to kind of get out of the house and socialise with people.”

“I know when I do that for too long I start acting weird and will get to a point where, like, hang on, have I eaten anything besides bread for two days? No. So, I need to interact with people to keep myself mentally and socially well.”

“then there's just the whole thing of being around other people, which is in general good for us although we can't really explain why.”



Interpersonal motivations

Seeking connection

A number of the participants were open about being lonely and wanting to establish networks or meet new people. Many talked about the isolation of working or studying and the lack of connections in those domains, as well as wanting to meet people in their same age group.

"I sort of fit the bill for the target audience of being a lonely 18 to 30-year-old in the area."

"I just want to connect some different people ... I'm working, but actually, sometimes we can't truly regard our colleagues as friends. We need like pure friendship or pure activities to connect with different people."

Seeking companionship, expanding networks

Many participants wanted to meet new people and make new connections, but were pragmatic and sought more functional benefits from the program. They were seeking companionship and friends, often outside work or study; to be sociable, meet like-minded people and have fun. They wanted to get to know their neighbours for a sense of community or personal safety, or to strengthen or extend existing networks.

"I didn't really have any friends in Belconnen and didn't have a lot of stuff outside of uni to go to. So, I just wanted to meet people, find activities to do, and things to get my mind out of studying for at least a minute."

"I thought that there would be maybe interesting people with maybe similar interests. Just social things to do with interesting people."

"It's to hang out with people my age and just do fun stuff, basically."

"Sometimes all we need is someone beside us, that's it. Sometimes we need someone beside us even without some conversations or something, like we need someone."

"I do have a friend group that I regularly see, but this is more just an opportunity to expand it."

Community-level motivations: Sharing, contributing

The Volunteers involved in Connect Up 2617 presented the highest level of investment in the program outside paid Community Connectors. Their motivations for involvement were both altruistic and practical – they discussed creating their own communities because they wanted it themselves, developing practical skills and evolving personally and professionally, but also that they wanted to teach others and share what they had learned after going through periods of loneliness themselves.

"We really, really love the idea of being, you know, like an integral part of the community and it's part of, you know, feeling safe and feeling at home and feeling welcomed."

"I think that quite a bit of people that want to get involved with volunteering and community are here because they've personally struggled themselves."

"I just love to teach and I'm quite good at it. So, I think it kind of was a nice opportunity to practice teaching something different."

Volunteers noted the challenge and the reward that "it's not necessarily the first thing that we feel like doing sometimes" but that it was worthwhile because "in some small way we've achieved that goal of sort of being part of the fabric of the place that we live".

Some also noted their empathy and alignment with the program, either through their experiences of being new to a community, loneliness, or wanting to be involved and share skills.

"I've felt loneliness, very deeply, so it really chimed with me."

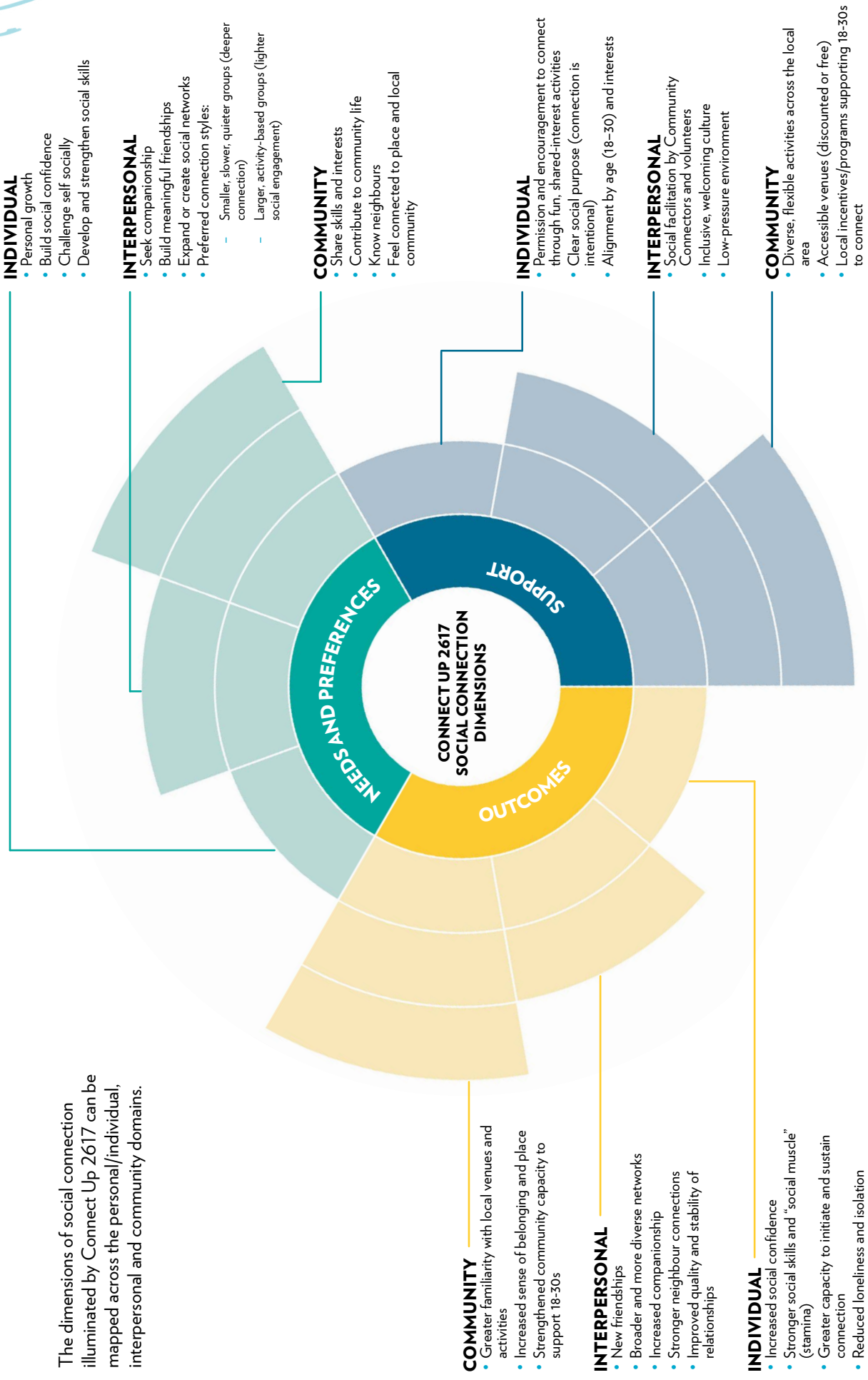
Activities need to match social connection preferences

As previously noted, the Connect Up 2617 activities were originally developed or integrated into community with common interests front of mind – that people would want to connect over interests or activities they liked, and that these activities would provide both a portal and a crutch for social connection. This assumption was borne out.

However, although interest was a motivator for people to participate in different activities – sporty people liked badminton, for example – it also was clear that different types of activities appealed to people's varying preferences for social connection. Participants themselves noted that people had different social connection preferences or needs, and the activities served (or matched) these. For example, participants noted that badminton attracted more outgoing participants who were happy to talk with a range of people seeking a wider network of friends, or that slower or smaller activities attracted people who might want deeper connection or who found larger groups daunting.

FIGURE 2: SOCIAL CONNECTION DIMENSIONS

The dimensions of social connection illuminated by Connect Up 2617 can be mapped across the personal/individual, interpersonal and community domains.



INDIVIDUAL

- Personal growth
- Build social confidence
- Challenge self socially
- Develop and strengthen social skills

INTERPERSONAL

- Seek companionship
- Build meaningful friendships
- Expand or create social networks
- Preferred connection styles:
 - Smaller, slower, quieter groups (deeper connection)
 - Larger, activity-based groups (lighter social engagement)

COMMUNITY

- Share skills and interests
- Contribute to community life
- Know neighbours
- Feel connected to place and local community

INDIVIDUAL

- Permission and encouragement to connect through fun, shared-interest activities
- Clear social purpose (connection is intentional)
- Alignment by age (18-30) and interests

INTERPERSONAL

- Social facilitation by Community Connectors and volunteers
- Inclusive, welcoming culture
- Low-pressure environment

COMMUNITY

- Diverse, flexible activities across the local area
- Accessible venues (discounted or free)
- Local incentives/programs supporting 18-30s to connect

COMMUNITY

- Greater familiarity with local venues and activities
- Increased sense of belonging and place
- Strengthened community capacity to support 18-30s

INTERPERSONAL

- New friendships
- Broader and more diverse networks
- Increased companionship
- Stronger neighbour connections
- Improved quality and stability of relationships

INDIVIDUAL

- Increased social confidence
- Stronger social skills and “social muscle” (stamina)
- Greater capacity to initiate and sustain connection
- Reduced loneliness and isolation

KEY CONNECTIVE ELEMENTS FOSTER WELCOMING CULTURES

The “multi-dimensional factors for socially-connective activities” in the Connect Up 2617 program were key to creating the culture or the “vibe” of the activities that participants highlighted as being key to their ongoing participation. These elements included the “low pressure, low barriers to entry” nature of the activities that led to a relaxed feel of low social risk; the social facilitation provided by the Community Connectors which also set behavioural norms of friendliness and inclusivity; activity-connection matching for interests and social connection preferences and needs, and enabling of alignment and common ground between participants.

MORE SOCIAL CONNECTION CAN LEAD TO A SENSE OF BELONGING AND COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS

“Bounded” social connection and belonging

The “bounded” nature of social connections was often remarked upon by participants – that they had friends or connections to hang out with or chat to during Connect Up 2617 activities, but this did not extend to friendship beyond those activities. This was not seen as a failure but as either a compartmentalised – and satisfactory – aspect of life as they didn’t have the time or capacity for more, or a meaningful step towards people starting to feel more connected to others and to their communities.

Participants talked about how their involvement in Connect Up 2617 made them feel a part of something bigger than themselves. For some, they felt a sense of belonging or community while they were in the Connect Up events only – fleeting hours of community.

“I guess I have that sense of belonging to a part of a community, which is like the people that show up to the events. Outside of it, not really.”

“it’s a short feeling of community while you’re there, which then goes away.”

Others felt that through connections with others, by others listening to them and hanging out with them, they felt accepted; that they felt more at home locally, or that they felt more a part of the broader human community.

“I very like this suburb. It make me feel at home, actually. It made me feel at home.”

“over time, I felt like I had less and less anxiety about talking to people of different – especially for me, different age, different sexual orientation, and feeling accepted and just feeling, I guess, more a part of just being a part of humanity, really.”

“belonging is probably the simplest and most concise word. It’s hard to summarise an entire depth of experience in one single word, but belonging is pretty much exactly what I could say about it (Connect Up).”

This suggests that, if there are enough opportunities where people feel connected in certain times and spaces, these activities could act as steps to a broader sense of community belonging and connectedness.

Changed perceptions of Belco: It's home now

Many participants noted that they felt differently about Belconnen after taking part in Connect Up 2617. Some mentioned that they had moved to Belconnen for Connect Up; that they were not moving as originally intended because of Connect Up; that it was an anchor for them to do more locally, that it had gone from a place with facilities and a place where they slept to being more like a home, a community, a place with heart.

"having all this connection in the suburb and being able to know people and feel kind of safe and connected, I'm very much like – this is a much different kind of vibe to what people led me to believe prior to moving here."

"I thought in a busy place like Belconnen it would never happen. But it's different. Connect Up did change that perspective of mine, yeah. I never thought Belconnen would be so friendly."

"I think of it as so much warmer and I'm so proud of Belconnen."

"Belconnen feels a lot more like home."

"I feel like there's more heart and soul and vibrancy to Belconnen than I remembered."

Sense of community, sense of place

Many participants felt a keener sense of community and place as a result of Connect Up 2617. This ranged from noticing local landmarks or parks after being involved in murals or markets, to "microcosm" communities in apartments, where apartment dwellers now knew their neighbours well enough to have coffees or propose going out, to creatives feeling they had found other members of a creative community, to a generalised feeling of support and trust. Participants from diverse cultural backgrounds talked about knowing more local Australians when they had previously only known others from their home countries.

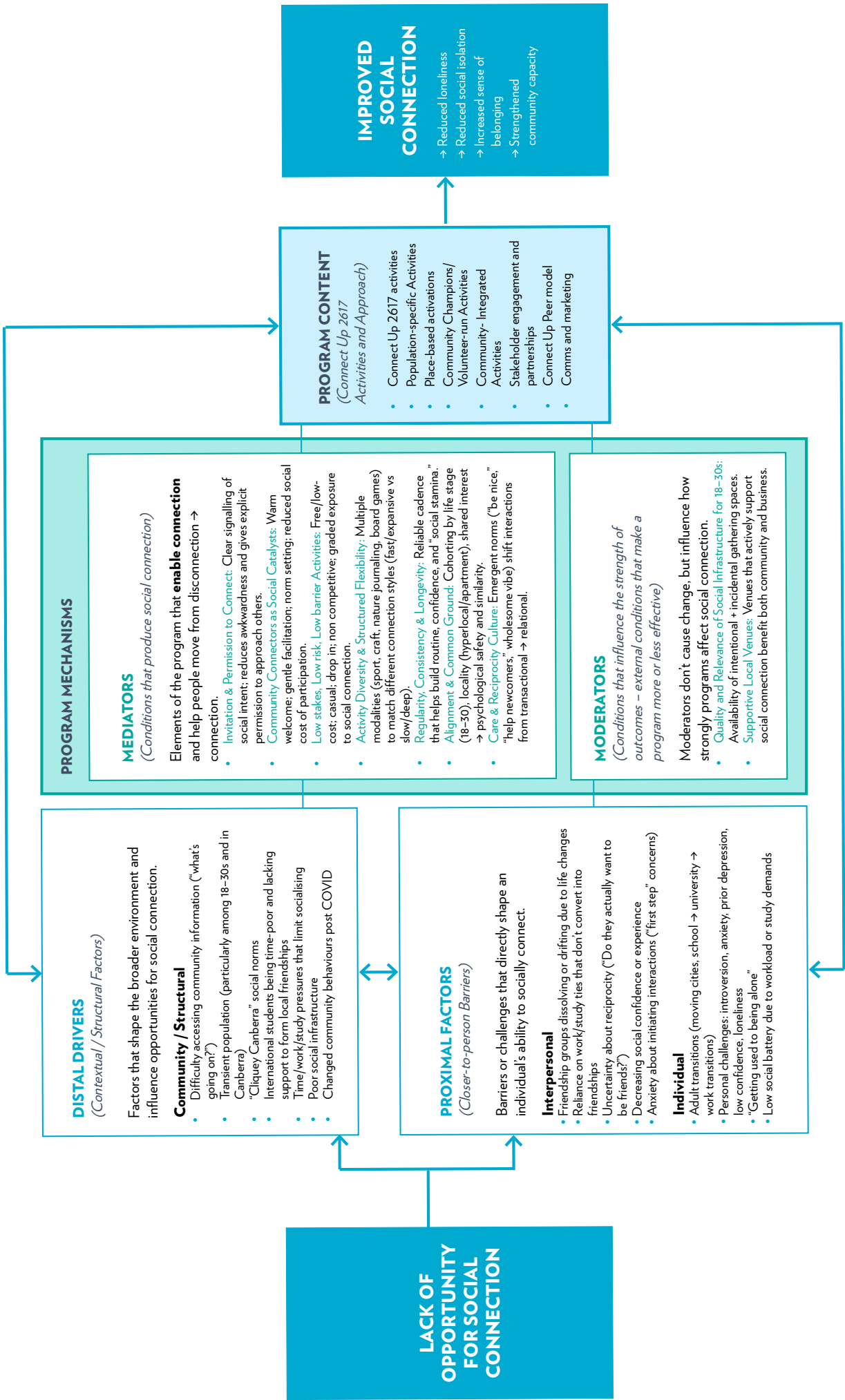
"We can talk about badminton, sports ... and about arts and craft. It give me more deeper experience in Belconnen and also have deeper understanding of kind of Australian life."

"it's good just being able to know who some of your neighbours are and ask questions and have things like, hey, there's this new bar I want to check out. Does anyone want to come with me?"

"So now like when I walk past on my way to Westfield, I look, I'm like, oh, like I contributed to that, you know?"



FIGURE 3: A SOCIOECOLOGICAL MODEL: BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY FOR SOCIAL CONNECTION



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR FUTURE POLICY AND PRACTICE

1.

EMBED SOCIAL CONNECTIVITY AS WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT, WHOLE OF COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITY

Policy and practice must shift from individual-focused interventions to collective capacity-building for social connection to support people before chronic loneliness develops. This requires coordinated action across multiple sectors and recognition that addressing loneliness benefits entire communities, not just affected individuals. Policies should prioritise funding for community-led initiatives, support co-designed interventions, and integrate social connection metrics into public health and wellbeing frameworks.

2.

ADOPT MULTI-MODAL, PERSON-CENTRED APPROACHES

Effective interventions must work across individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels simultaneously whilst retaining the flexibility to tailor to individuals. The socioecological model of building community capacity for social connection developed through this project provides a framework for comprehensive approaches.

3.

PRIORITISE THOSE AGED 18-30s THROUGH POLICY AND CO-DESIGN

Adults aged 18-30s face particular social connection challenges due to transitions in social networks and life circumstances and report among the highest levels of loneliness. Their social connection needs, and how to meet them, deserve a particular policy and program focus which is best designed and delivered by them.

4.

AUDIT SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE THROUGH A SOCIAL CONNECTION LENS

Suburbs with social infrastructure may still lack useful space for young people to gather. Social connection audits should be undertaken in suburbs with high numbers of 18-30s to identify gaps and opportunities for supporting and promoting third spaces and meeting places for this age group.

5.

CREATE POLICY LEVERS FOR “SOCIALLY CONNECTIVE” VENUES AND ORGANISATIONS

Incentives should encourage venues or organisations to accommodate free or heavily discounted social connection opportunities or activities at times appropriate for young adults aged 18-30s. This might include tax benefits, grants, or recognition programs.

6.

INVEST IN RELATIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES AND ROLES

Social connection can be strengthened through strategies that support peer support and social network building in real-life contexts. These should include peer social facilitators or catalysts who are diverse, reflecting varied backgrounds and interests; casual or Volunteer-based to enable after-hours and weekend availability; and properly trained in social connection facilitation. Supporting and scaling these roles creates both employment opportunities and community benefit.

7.

IMPLEMENT “FIRST STEP” SOCIAL CONNECTION APPROACHES

Programs should incorporate elements proven to be effective in Connect Up 2617, including:

- Creating an invitation and permission to socially connect
- Developing and training Community Connectors as “social catalysts”
- Ensuring activities are:
 - explicit about their purpose of social connection
 - low stakes, low risk, low barriers to entry
 - diverse and have “structured flexibility”
 - recognise diverse social connection needs, preferences and desired outcomes
 - regular, consistent and have longevity
 - designed for alignment and establishment of common ground between participants
- Focus on creating a culture of inclusivity, care and reciprocity.

8.

NORMALISE SOCIAL CONNECTION BY PROMOTING ITS VALUE

Social connection is a fundamental need. By acknowledging the role it plays in our health and being explicit about the value of purposeful connective programs, we can move away from the stigma of loneliness and towards the open pursuit of social connection.

SUSTAINABILITY AND NEXT STEPS

The demonstrated success of Connect Up 2617 has led to its transition from pilot project to mainstream program. Capital Region Community Services (CRCS) has assumed responsibility for ongoing delivery, with plans for regional expansion beyond the initial Belconnen and Bruce focus areas. This transition represents a crucial validation of the model and creates opportunities for determining longer term sustainability, scaling up and impact.

Sustaining and expanding such initiatives requires ongoing commitment from multiple stakeholders. Continued evaluation will be essential to understand how the model adapts across different contexts and whether outcomes remain robust over longer timeframes. Additionally, documenting and sharing learnings will support other communities seeking to implement similar approaches.

“If it wasn’t for these kinds of programs and activities being hosted ... it wouldn’t be as clear to me where I should go next if I want to socialise.”



CONCLUSION

Connect Up 2617 successfully demonstrated that community-based, peer-led approaches can meaningfully address loneliness and strengthen social connection among young adults. The project's comprehensive model – integrating, supporting and training peer Community Connectors and Volunteers, diverse low barrier activities, strategic venue partnerships, and genuine community participation – produced statistically significant improvements in loneliness and belonging while generating broader community benefits.

The fundamental insight that loneliness is a community responsibility requiring collective action challenges prevailing individual-focused approaches and points toward more effective, sustainable solutions. By treating social connection as essential infrastructure deserving systematic investment and support, communities can create environments where all residents, particularly vulnerable young adults, have genuine opportunities to connect, belong, and thrive.

As loneliness continues to emerge as a critical public health priority globally, the Connect Up 2617 model offers a practical, evidence-based blueprint for action. Its success in the ACT context suggests broader applicability, while the detailed documentation of both enablers and barriers provides valuable guidance for adaptation to diverse settings. The transition to mainstream delivery through CRCS represents not an endpoint but a beginning – an opportunity to refine, scale, and ultimately transform how communities support the fundamental human need for connection.

“I’m hopeful that the community will be a more fun place to live. But also like a warmer place to live, a place where we maybe have a little bit more trust, and a place where we not necessarily feel safer, but we feel more supported by each other.”

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