



UNIVERSITY OF
CANBERRA



CONNECT UP 2617

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: EVALUATION REPORT
AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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CONNECTUP²⁶¹⁷

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is the final evaluation report for the Connect Up 2617 pilot project, funded by the Medical Research Futures Fund (MRFF APP1184607) and run by the Health Research Institute, University of Canberra, together with the communities of Bruce and Belconnen.

The Connect Up 2617 Research Team and Report Authors acknowledge and deeply thank the Community Connectors, Volunteers, participants, Working Group and Connect Up 2617 Advisory Group for their enthusiasm, support and collaboration in developing and delivering this pilot project, and for their rich insights which have been considered and incorporated into this report.

Thank you to those local organisations and venues that supported Connect Up 2617 and who reaped the financial and community benefits in return, and to the ACT Government for supporting the art mural projects in the Belconnen area as part of the project.

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

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Suggested citation: Walsh B., Sandham S., Davey R. 2026 “Connect Up 2617” – Building local social connection for 18-30s in Belconnen and Bruce – Executive Summary: Final Evaluation Report and Recommendations. Health Research Institute, University of Canberra.

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.



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 Survey 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 home), 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) 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

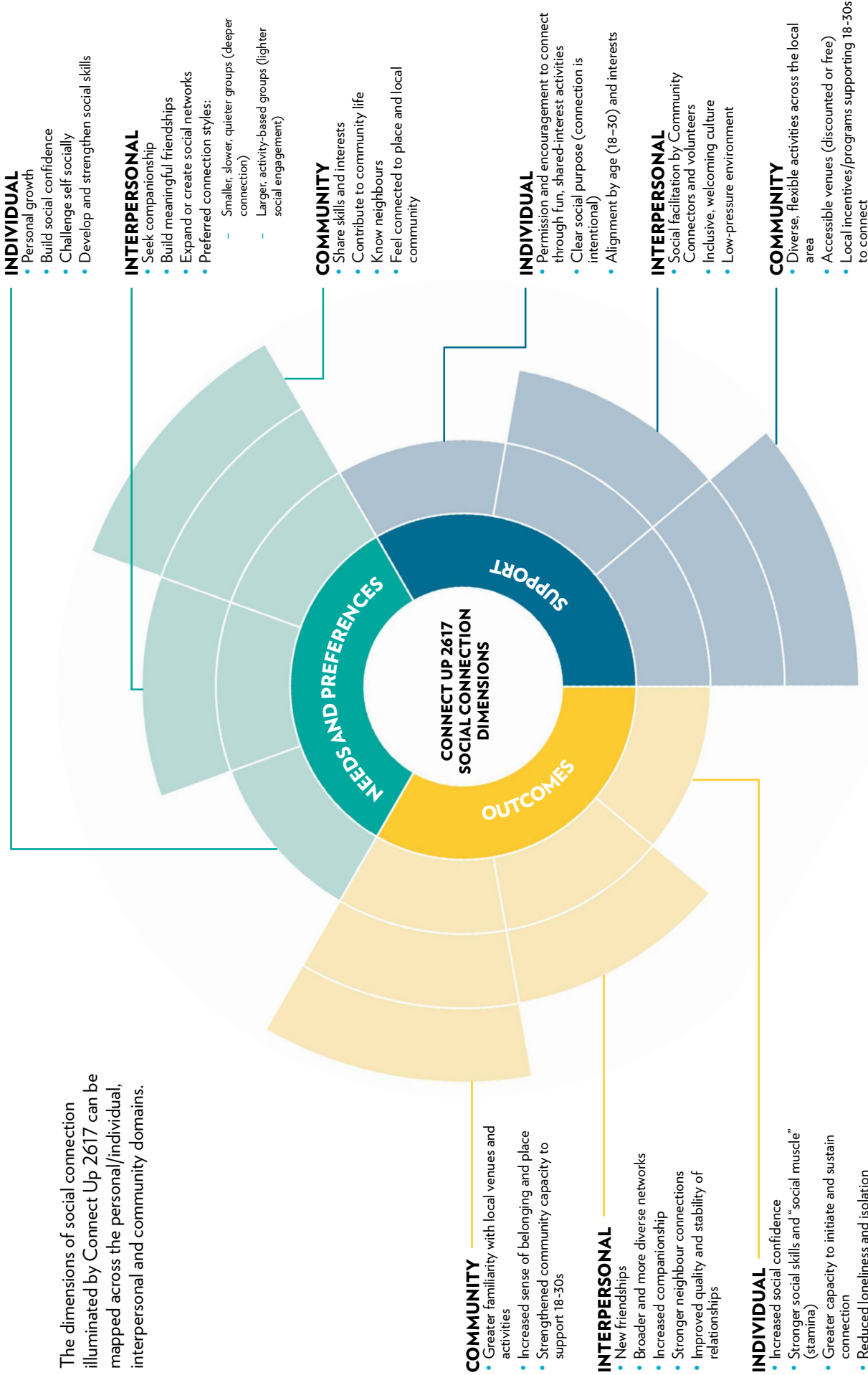
Many participants experienced practical benefits to their sociability and social connections, finding companionship but also reaping functional benefits such as knowing neighbours for safety, not having to rely on work colleagues for friendships, or just being around people because it made them feel 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 1: 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.

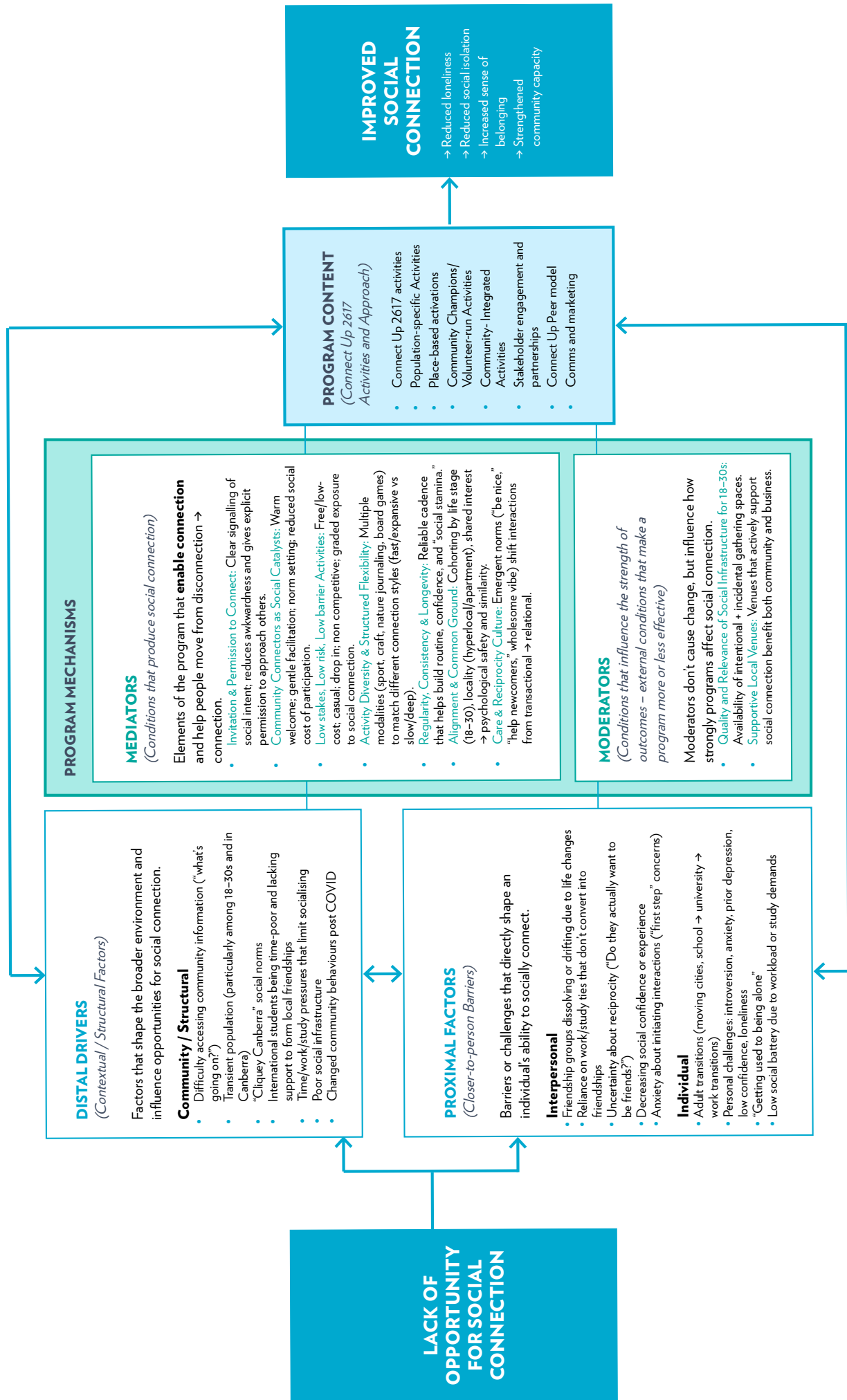
5.

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 2: 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.

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."

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

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