



Connect Up 2617 Project

BENEFITS AND IMPACT – INTERIM FINDINGS

Purpose: to trial and evaluate sustainable ways for 18–30 year olds in Bruce and Belconnen to build meaningful social connections and a sense of belonging.

Social connection is associated with better mental and physical health. Poor social connection – or disconnection – is linked to an increased risk of depression and manifests in loneliness, social isolation, lack of social support and low social capital.¹

Research shows those aged 18–30 report among the highest levels of loneliness. Belconnen and Bruce have more than twice the number of this age group compared to the ACT average. Connect Up 2617 was co-designed with and for these communities.

Loneliness is a community-level issue and solutions must strengthen both individual and community capacity for connection.

IMPACT

... 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."

Volunteer, September 2025

I am better (now) at communicating with new people. 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 people... they are so welcoming, all of them.

Participant, September 2025

Everyone has unique social connection needs and preferences. Social connection happens across a range of accessible, regular, diverse opportunities over time, through invitations to connect with others of the same age and similar interests supported by safe, welcoming and accessible third spaces.

From October 2024 to October 2025, the project coordinated:

- **10 Community Connectors**
- **28 activities a month on average**
- **650 participants**

(379 attended one activity only, 266 attended two or more activities).

As a result of Connect Up 2617*:

Respondents reported statistically significant positive changes in their feelings about lacking companionship, feeling isolated and feeling left out before and after Connect Up 2617.

**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

*Final survey: 86 respondents

[1] Holt-Lunstad J. Social connection as a public health issue: the evidence and a systemic framework for prioritizing the "social" in social determinants of health. *Annu Rev Public Health*. 2022;43:193–213 (<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-052020-110732>). P198 [1] From loneliness to social connection - charting a path to healthier societies: report of the WHO Commission on Social Connection. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2025. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.



Connect Up 2617 Project

THE ETHOS

Connect Up 2617 is designed for 18-30s. Come as you are – we're inclusive, welcoming, accessible, low-cost and low pressure.

6-10 CASUAL COMMUNITY CONNECTORS

- Peer-led locals to facilitate connection and welcome all
- Lived experience of loneliness; passion for social connection and community
- Aged from 22 to 30 years, variety of cultural backgrounds, professional experiences, interests and skills, working evenings and weekends.

CONNECTION THROUGH ACTIVITIES:

- Regular, low cost, low pressure, diverse and wide range to cater for different interests and social connection styles; loosely structured yet flexible and responsive
- Integration into existing networks and activities; population-specific such as social strolling for parents, carers and bubs; interest-based such as crafting, arts and crafts, street art murals; games nights, local hiking, community gardening, dancing, nature journalling and music nights.

COMMUNITY BUY-IN

- Guidance through Working/Advisory Group
- Engagement and activities with local stakeholders, organisations (CIT, UC, Belco Arts) and venues (Qure Bar and Grill, Belconnen Community Centre, Kiln Café, Stella's by the Lake, Lighthouse Pub).

VOLUNTEERS AND RESIDENTS

- 6 volunteers helped drive and support activities; 15 volunteers in total signed up by project end as part of the ongoing program
- Apartment residents initiated dinners and BBQs in their complexes; Connect Up 2617 supported with initial start-up until they became self-sufficient. Regular dinners are ongoing.

TARGETED COMMUNICATION

- Promotion of activities and messages of social connection through website, social media, e-newsletters and print collateral.

*Interviews and small conversation groups: 54 participants

Participants told us they experienced*:

- ▲ An increased number and diversity of social connections
- ▲ Enhanced sense of community connectedness: sense of place, belonging, mutual support, changed perceptions of local community.
- ▲ Personal growth: increased confidence, hope, sociability, willingness and motivation to keep connecting.

COMMUNITY VOICES

I mean it's a good, friendly culture, which starts... from the Connectors and moves out throughout the group. So whenever we have a new person, people always introduce themselves to them and start talking to them.
Participant, September 2025

So after being with Connect Up, we have definitely become a lot more community focused. ... we're also organising more events with other people.
Local Venue Manager, October 2025

Sometimes when we do these things we make quite a big step in one area of our lives... for me, this was a big step... I'd lost the idea that I could even function in society again. It has made a huge difference for me.
Volunteer, August 2025



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Looking through a 'Social Connection' lens: how can we move away from individual responsibility for addressing loneliness and towards building societal capacity for social connection? A variety of small, local, diverse and low-key opportunities and support for social connection can alleviate loneliness and build a sense of belonging and community connectedness.

If I was just looking for a way to connect with my community, the first place I'm looking is not somewhere that's for loneliness. I'm looking for somewhere to connect with my community. The aim is for it to be about what you're moving towards... what we want as opposed to what we're moving away from.

Consultation Participant, May 2024

Consider that:

01 SOCIAL CONNECTION IS DIFFERENT FOR EVERYONE

- Build in opportunities explicitly and incidentally
- People want different outcomes and have different approaches to social connection.



02 ACTIVITIES ARE A PORTAL TO, AND SUPPORT FOR, SOCIAL CONNECTION

Make sure they're:

- Targeted for particular age groups – i.e. 18-30s
- Regular, loosely structured yet flexible and responsive
- Explicit and open about creating connection
- Low cost, low barrier to entry and low pressure.

03 PERSON-CENTRED APPROACHES ARE CRUCIAL

- Offer diverse options – consider different interests, social connection needs and preferences
- Schedule to availability – ie flexible, after hours, weekends.



04 PEER COMMUNITY CONNECTORS ARE A SOCIAL GLUE AND SET BEHAVIOURAL NORMS

They should be:

- Diverse – from a range of different backgrounds, interests and skills
- Casual – to work after hours or weekends
- Trained – in social connection and facilitation.

05 VOLUNTEERING IS ITS OWN AVENUE FOR SOCIAL CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY

- Foster it.

06 SUCCESSFUL ACTIVITIES BUILD ON EXISTING COMMUNITY NETWORKS AND INTERESTS

- Support locals who want to drive activities and can bring in others
- Identify, support and promote local partners and venues who can host and promote activities. Community is good for business.

I guess before I kind of discovered (Connect Up) I wasn't really like going out at all or seeing really anyone outside of like (study) and work sort of thing... But now... it gives me something to look forward to... that's happening like every week. And it just kind of helps with my mental health as well, getting me out of the house and socialising.

Participant, September 2025

CO-DESIGN WITH COMMUNITY*

The Connect Up 2617 pilot was developed with the local community to ensure it aligned with local issues and met local needs in an age-appropriate way. Key steps included:

Working Group

12 local stakeholders and community representatives

Consultation

18 stakeholders and 144 residents between the ages of 18 and 30: conversations, small discussion groups, individual interviews and online survey

Co-design

Two workshops with Working Group members and consultation participants.

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

The Connect Up 2617 pilot is now a program of Capital Region Community Services (CRCS) in the ACT. There are plans to extend across the Belconnen region and employ Community Connectors in 2026.



I'd like to keep attending whatever is available to me as much as I can 'cause it's definitely something I want to support... any sort of involvement really because it's become such a dear part of my life now.
Participant, September 2025

CONNECTUP²⁶¹⁷

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CITATION

Walsh B, Davey R (2025): "Policy brief: Connect Up 2617 for Social Connection – interim findings". University of Canberra.

CONNECT UP 2617 PILOT:

Contact:

connectupbelco@canberra.edu.au | uchri@canberra.edu.au

Research website:

canberra.edu.au/research/centres/hri/research-projects/connect-up

CONNECT UP PROGRAM

Capital Region Community Services (CRCS):

contact@crccs.com.au | www.connectup.au