

CONNECTUP²⁶¹⁷

MEET SHARE BELONG

Community-led Connection

The Connect Up 2617 Pilot Project

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Community-led Connection

1. What is Connect Up? How - and why - we began
2. Growing Community – Connect Up 2617 pilot October 2024-2025
3. Outcomes and Impacts – what we know so far
4. Lessons learned and next steps



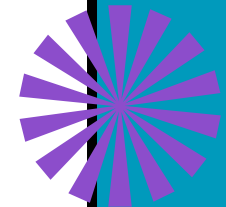
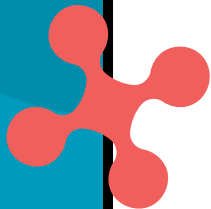
Connect Up 2617

A pilot project developed with and for the Belconnen community in the ACT to trial, and evaluate, sustainable ways for locals aged 18-30 to meaningfully connect, create and share experiences, and develop a sense of community belonging.

Scoping, consultation and co-design: March – June 2024

Project setup and recruitment: July- September 2024

Project rollout and evaluation: October 2024 – October 2025



How - and why - we began

- MRFF Grant to explore community-based interventions to address public health issues
- Loneliness
 - Highest amongst 18-30 year olds locally¹
 - Chosen suburbs (Bruce and Belconnen) high in numbers of 18-30s; over 40% collectively; ACT average 16%²
 - Also high in social fragmentation³
- Community-based approach drawn from models of Social Prescription and Link Workers
- Focus on social connection, not loneliness; focus on people, community, and place. Where to start?



Co-design with community

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)⁴

Working Group

- 12 local stakeholders and community representatives
- Workshops to scope out issues and consultation approach



Consultation

- Stakeholder engagement and meetings (n=18)
- Small group conversations, individual interviews, survey (n=144)



Co-design

- Two workshops with Working Group, consultation participants (n=20)
- Develop pilot model, approach and desired outcomes



Growing community - Connect Up 2617

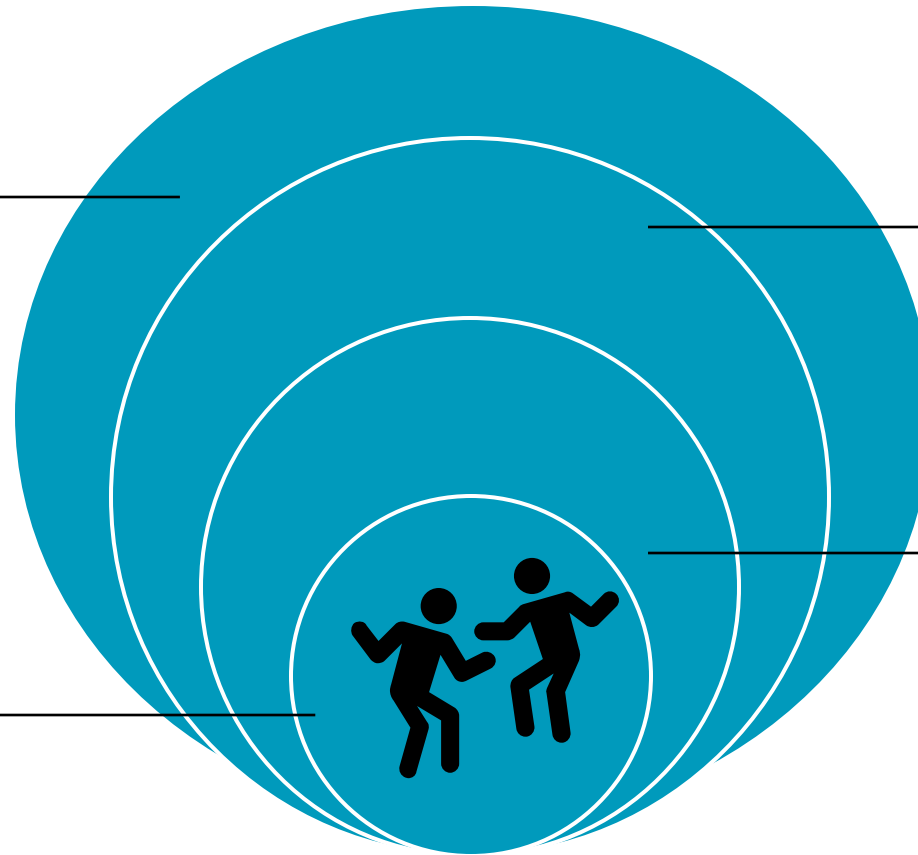
A socio-ecological response to build individual and community capacity for social connection

Engagement, governance

- Project management
- Communication and Promotion
- Staff and volunteer management
- Stakeholder engagement
- Advisory Group
- Evaluation

Diverse activities

- General, interest-based
- Population-specific
- Volunteer-led
- Place activations



Community integration and support

- Activation of local venues, businesses and organisations
- Integration with existing activities where possible

Peer-led support and social facilitation

- Community Connectors
- Volunteers



Community Connectors

- 6-10 casual Community Connectors
- Peer to peer model
- Local; aged from 22-30 years
- Variety of cultural backgrounds, professional experiences, interests and skills
- Lived experience of loneliness; interest and passion in loneliness, social connection, community
- Facilitators, welcomers, friendly faces of all activities
- Training and supervision throughout the year



Weekly social
strolling for
parents, carers
and bubs



Crafting activities at local
Community Centre
(fortnightly) and local café
(weekly).



Music nights at
local venues



Weekly badminton
at the Community
Centre



Environmental
activities: long
and short hikes,
community
garden



Art classes,
sessions, Street
art workshops,
Nature
Journalling

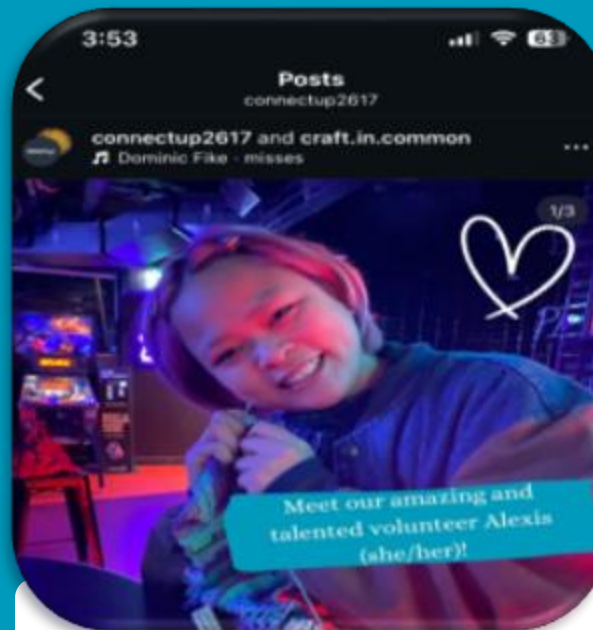


Games nights, D&D
at the local Bar &
Grill, local CIT (TAFE)
and Community
Centre



Community integration

Trivia at the local pub –
join the table



Support of volunteers and residents

Craft sessions,
apartment dinners,
dance classes

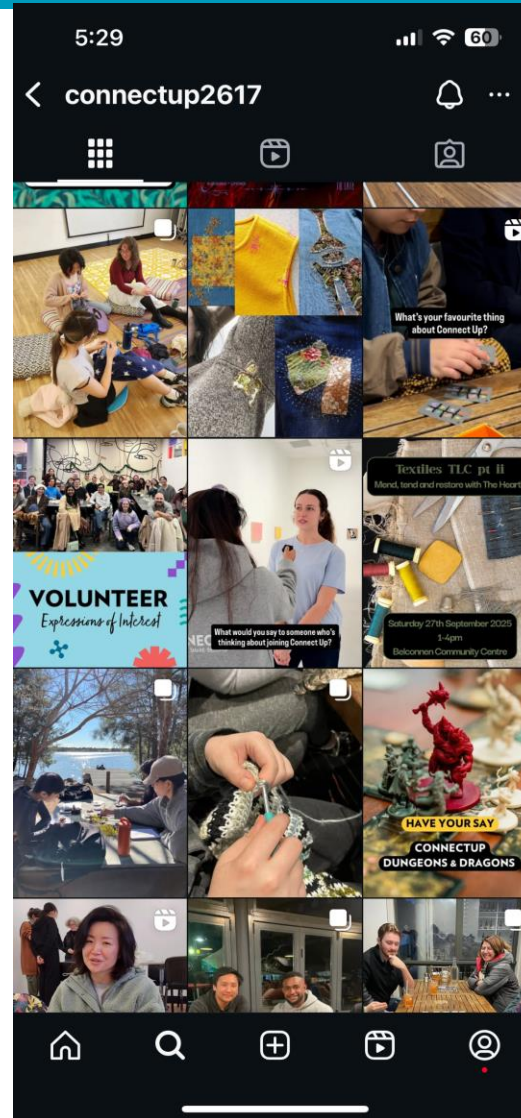


Engagement, governance

Governance – Advisory
Group
Local buy-in – local
venues, businesses,
institutions

Promotion

- Website
- Socials (Instagram, facebook)
- Weekly enewsletter
- Media
- Collateral – fliers, posters, banners, letterbox drops and local distribution



Calling all adventurers. We're conjuring up a new **Dungeons & Dragons** event for 18 to 30s and we want your input to make it legendary. If you're a seasoned player or dungeon master or maybe you've always wanted to join, this is your chance to



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**A PLACE TO
BELONG, A CHANCE
TO CONNECT.**



Outcomes and Impacts

650 individual participants

379 people attended one activity only

266 people attended 2 or more activities

15 registered volunteers by project end

18-24 years predominant age range

Almost **50%** international (India/China/
Nepal/Phillipines)





Survey

Midpoint survey #1:
participants who had attended
2 or more activities (n= 115)

End survey #2: participants
who had attended 2 or more
activities (n= 86)



Social Connections

Over **70%** agreed/strongly agreed:
More friends I see or hear from once a
month

Almost **50%** agreed/strongly agreed:
More friends I can call on for help

Over **75%** agreed/strongly agreed:
I now feel a part of a group who shares
attitudes and beliefs



Loneliness

Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$)
positive changes in perceptions of
lacking companionship, feeling
isolated and feeling left out before and
after Connect Up 2617 (UCL3)

Belonging

Almost **90%** said Connect Up had
positively impacted their sense of
belonging

Interviews and groups

Stakeholders (n= 7)
Community Connectors (n=10)
Volunteers (n=6)
Participants (n=41)
Advisory Group workshop (n=15)

Motivations

Make friends, extend networks
Same age and stage
Free, regular, social, no pressure
Want and need community
Get out of the house; connection is good for me

Impacts

Increased number and diversity of social connections; reduced loneliness and social isolation

Marked, enhanced sense of community connectedness – sense of place, belonging, mutual support, changed perceptions of local community

Personal growth - increased confidence, hope, willingness and motivation to keep connecting

First steps are the hardest; then it gets easier

Volunteers

Significant impacts:
Increased confidence, empowerment, personal growth, skills development, sense of community

Community Connectors

Profound experiences and impacts: Skills development
Personal growth
Deep friendships
Belief in importance of community and social connection
Pride

What worked

Community Connectors as facilitators
Low stakes, no pressure, accessible: come as you are
Open, supportive, inclusive culture; established norms
Being taken care of; community support and care
Alignment with others
Activities: 'structured flexibility', variety and diversity, organic growth

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It is such.. just an unexplainable experience to just connect with so many people on so many levels like that
(Participant)

Because there's a lot of times where I'm like, I could just watch some Netflix in my pyjamas. Do I really want to make the effort to go see people and be presentable, you know? Yeah, put on pants.... But once we actually get out there and then make new friends, we're like, oh, that was totally worth it. (Participant)

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. 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. It has made a huge difference for me.
(Volunteer)

Some early lessons learned

A socio-ecological approach to strengthening community capacity for social connection means adopting a social connection 'lens' to explore:

- Diverse needs, preferences for, and approaches to, social connection
- Developing variety of activities that are:
 - Regular, loosely structured yet flexible, provide balance of activity and connection, are explicit and open about creating connection, are low barrier and low pressure
 - Low thresholds/levels of social connection can make a big difference
- Ensuring approaches are peer-developed, led and facilitated by trained community connectors and/or volunteers
 - Meet known needs; welcome, include, facilitate, set behavioural norms
 - Volunteering is another way to connect
- Building community connectedness through multiple opportunities and support for social connection



From research pilot to community program

- ✓ Pilot now a program of Capital Region Community Services (CRCS) in the ACT
- ✓ Two Community Connectors now Community Development Facilitators at CRCS
- ✓ Plans to extend across the Belconnen region



References

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3. Bagheri, N., Batterham, P.J., Salvador-Carulla, L. et al (2019). Development of the Australian neighborhood social fragmentation index and its association with spatial variation in depression across communities. Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol 54, 1189–1198.
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Thank you!

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