

# Increasing social connections

## Local government action guide no. 4

Promoting health and preventing illness in the community



Local governments play a major role in supporting the objectives of the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008* by protecting, improving and promoting public health within their municipality. By integrating action across the social, cultural, built, economic and natural environments, council policies and practices can make major contributions to economic prosperity, community cohesion and population health outcomes.<sup>1,2</sup>

By providing opportunities for people to connect with others, join a group and be engaged in local activities, councils can improve the mental health and wellbeing of their residents. Communities with high levels of social cohesion, including participation by individuals in community organisations and activities, typically have better health than those with low levels.<sup>3</sup>

This guide is one of ten outlining a range of evidence-informed actions that councils may consider when preparing their Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans and other strategies. The proposed strategies are consistent with national and state health promotion priorities and prevention frameworks, including *The Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2011–2015*.

### Why are increasing social connections and improving social cohesion public health and wellbeing priorities?

- People who are socially isolated and excluded are more likely to experience low self-esteem, depressive symptoms and have a higher risk of coronary heart disease.<sup>4</sup>
- More Australians are living alone compared to previous generations.<sup>5</sup>
- Social cohesion may protect the mental health of people living in disadvantaged areas.<sup>6,7</sup>
- Young people's engagement with creative activities can lead to better academic outcomes, improved levels of self-esteem and a reduction in alcohol and drug consumption.<sup>8</sup>

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Social support can buffer the effect of an adverse event or stressful life circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

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## A sample council strategy to increase social connections

### Strategic goal

Council is committed to providing opportunities for increasing residents' social connections.

### Objectives and actions

#### Ensure access and equity for all groups in the community

- Hold regular forums with local multicultural groups and others who may experience social isolation or exclusion.
- Improve access to home and community care services for people from diverse backgrounds.
- Develop a guide for affordable local recreational and exercise activities.
- Work in partnership with communities and businesses to identify and provide training and employment opportunities for people from disadvantaged groups.
- Develop a strategy on homelessness that addresses social isolation and health issues.

#### Support activities that build community and social networks

- Support street parties and local-level leadership activities that promote a sense of community spirit.
- Develop projects and events, such as community festivals, that celebrate the municipality's diversity.
- Identify and develop community-based methods of support such as babysitting clubs, walking groups and food cooperatives.
- Support local efforts to engage more people in community volunteering and citizenship activities, such as volunteer groups, churches, service clubs, and professional or political associations.
- Support participation in social activities that bring people together, such as those run by community groups, sport clubs or arts groups.

#### Strengthen council's connection with the community

- Increase council staff's awareness of different groups' needs and barriers to participation.
- Undertake a staff language survey to identify those who speak languages other than English.
- Provide cross-cultural training for staff in aged and disability services to ensure appropriate cultural sensitivity in service delivery.
- Review local planning approaches to strengthen community facilities in each neighbourhood.
- Conduct an analysis of locations where people may not be socially connected (e.g. identify areas where many people live alone or do not speak English).
- Encourage community participation and engagement in council planning, implementation and evaluation.

### References

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- 2 Wilkinson, R & Marmot, M, 2003, *Social determinants of health: The solid facts* (2nd edn), [www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-publish/abstracts/social-determinants-of-health-the-solid-facts](http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-publish/abstracts/social-determinants-of-health-the-solid-facts)
- 3 Stansfeld, S, 2006, 'Social support and social cohesion', in R Wilkinson & M Marmot (eds), *Social determinants of health* (2nd edn), Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 148–171.
- 4 Cornwell, E & Waite, L, 2009, 'Social disconnectedness, perceived isolation, and health among older adults', *Journal of Health & Social Behaviour*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 31–48.
- 5 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004, *Household and family projections: Australia 2001–2006*, cat. no. 3236.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 6 Zubrick, SR, 2007, 'Commentary: Area social cohesion, deprivation and mental health – does misery love company?', *International Journal of Epidemiology*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 345–347.
- 7 Fone, D, Dunstan, F, Lloyd, K, Williams, G, Watkins, J & Palmer, S, 2007, 'Does social cohesion modify the association between area income deprivation and mental health? A multilevel analysis', *International Journal of Epidemiology*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 338–345.
- 8 Effective Change, 2007, *Partnership resource for community arts*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.