



Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT



About ACTCOSS

ACTCOSS acknowledges Canberra has been built on the land of the Ngunnawal people. We pay respects to their Elders and recognise the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. We celebrate Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures and ongoing contributions to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) advocates for social justice in the ACT and represents not-for-profit community organisations.

ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS Network, made up of each of the state and territory Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS's vision is for Canberra to be a just, safe and sustainable community in which everyone has the opportunity for self-determination and a fair share of resources and services.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community-based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

ACTCOSS advises that this document may be publicly distributed, including by placing a copy on our website.

Contact Details

Phone 02 6202 7200
Address Weston Community Hub, 1/6 Gritten St, Weston ACT 2611
Email actcoss@actcoss.org.au
Web actcoss.org.au
CEO Dr Devin Bowles
Policy Officer Emma Hawke

February 2024

© Copyright ACT Council of Social Service Incorporated

This publication is copyright, apart from use by those agencies for which it has been produced. Non-profit associations and groups have permission to reproduce parts of this publication as long as the original meaning is retained and proper credit is given to the ACT Council of Social Service Inc (ACTCOSS). All other individuals and Agencies seeking to reproduce material from this publication should obtain the permission of the CEO of ACTCOSS.

An ACT Government funded initiative.





Table of Contents	
Summary of Recommendations	4
Introduction	7
The prevalence of loneliness and isolation in the ACT community.	7
Opportunities for the ACT Government to support organisations and individuals to address loneliness and social isolation and improve social connectedness in the ACT community.	8
Opportunities for the ACT Government to integrate improving social connectedness into other areas of policy making.	11



Summary of Recommendations

Increase funding of the community sector services.

Recommendation 1: Provide increased funding to community organisations to effectively respond to loneliness and isolation in the community to deliver early intervention and preventative programs to reduce loneliness and isolation.

Recommendation 2: Fund Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to build capacity to deliver culturally appropriate services to address loneliness and social isolation.

Strengthen Community Sector Workforce Capacity

Recommendation 3: Provide funding to build community sector worker skills through specific loneliness and isolation training so that they are better equipped to deal with clients experiencing loneliness and isolation.

Expand and Promote the ACT Community Directory

Recommendation 4: Provide additional funding to expand and enhance the Community Directory

Recommendation 5: Actively promote the Community Directory within ACT Government

Recommendation 6: Provide funding for a marketing campaign to raise public awareness of the Community Directory

Strengthen Local Community Building

Recommendation 7: Provide long term funding for ACT community development programs so they can be expanded to where the need is highest across the Territory.

Recommendation 8: Ensure community engagement strategies and initiatives are community led and designed with solutions relevant and appropriate to that community, including through expanding grant opportunities for community organisations to locally address loneliness and isolation.

Recommendation 9: Ensure the commissioning of the Community Development Program subsector incorporates recommendations from this Inquiry into the discovery process.

Develop an action plan: Building Community Connectedness

Recommendation 10: Develop an action plan with community sector partners to build community connectedness with a taskforce and funding attached.



Planning and the Built Environment

Recommendation 11: Conduct an audit of “free of charge” community and recreational spaces across the ACT and increase these spaces where they are identified as being needed.

Housing

Recommendation 12: Work with community and housing sector leaders and organisations to expand developing shared living models that facilitate interaction and relationships among residents.

Recommendation 13: Adopt broader housing planning policies that prioritise the creation of environments facilitating neighbour interaction and socialisation to enhance community connections.

Transport

Recommendation 14: Increase the hours and service areas of the Flexibus service.

Recommendation 15: Continue to support and actively participate in the ACT Transport Working Group

Recommendation 16: Fund the adequate provision of community transport for activities including traveling to social activities.

Recommendation 17 Trial free public transport for students and concession card holders and analyse the costs, benefits and distributional impact

Improve data collection and collate evidence- based approaches.

Recommendation 18: Work with the community sector to identify the most suitable tool to measure social isolation and loneliness to gather data for the ACT to assist in the allocation of resources in the future.

Recommendation 19: Increase the scope of data collected via the ACT Wellbeing Framework through expanding the indicators of Access and Connectivity, Social Connection and Identity and Belonging to better inform policy and support better community wellbeing outcomes.

Recommendation 20: Collate best practice research from other jurisdictions in addressing social isolation and loneliness to integrate effective strategies into local initiatives.

Recommendation 21: Expand the ACT Wellbeing Framework indicators to ensure that data relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is comprehensive and relevant to addressing social isolation and loneliness.



Improving supports in education settings

Recommendation 22: Increase personal support and mentoring programs for students within educational institutions.

Recommendation 23: Ensure that schools offer comprehensive mental health resources and support services to students, including counselling services, support groups, and access to mental health professionals.

Recommendation 24: Provide education and awareness programs to help students recognise the signs of loneliness and social isolation in themselves and others.

Recommendation 25: Provide training and professional development opportunities for educators to enhance their ability to identify signs of loneliness and refer students to appropriate resources.

Recommendation 26: Investigate educational initiatives that aim to address the underlying social determinants of health and strengthen the emotional and mental wellbeing of young people.

Social Prescribing

Recommendation 27: Implement a trial of a social prescription model linked in with the ACT Community Directory.

Recommendation 28: Resource and support Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to develop culturally appropriate social prescribing models.

Community Participation

Recommendation 29: Commit to ongoing funding from all relevant directorates across the Government to support the ACT Volunteering Strategy.

Recommendation 30: Increase free community events and programs being held across the ACT to build a sense of community, particularly across regional centres in the ACT.



Introduction

As the peak body representing the needs of the community services sector and people affected by poverty and disadvantage in the ACT, the ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Education and Community Inclusion Committee on the inquiry into loneliness and social isolation in the ACT by responding to three of the Terms of Reference below.

The Curtin University report entitled [Stronger Together: Loneliness and Social Connectedness in Australia](#) demonstrates that the impact of poverty on loneliness is substantial. Those in the lowest income decile are more than twice as likely to report being very lonely most of the time, compared to those in the highest income decile (28% vs. 12%). The loneliness gap between the richest and the poorest remains significant even when other factors are controlled. The impacts that poverty and financial hardship can generate include feelings of shame or inferiority that might induce people to withdraw socially. Limited resources can also curtail people's opportunities to initiate or maintain personal relationships.¹

ACTCOSS advocates that policy change needs to occur to reduce poverty and create understanding and supported pathways out of poverty. The ACT community need to do more to assist and support those groups most at risk of experiencing adverse outcomes from poverty such as loneliness and isolation. ACTCOSS advocates that it is vital to address the determinants of poverty and any action be underpinned by social justice principles to support equity, access and participation to tackle loneliness and isolation across the ACT for the most vulnerable and marginalised members of our community.

ACTCOSS has consulted with the ACT Transport Working Group, Volunteering ACT, and Communities at Work to gain input for this submission.

The prevalence of loneliness and isolation in the ACT community.

Statistics and research indicate that there is significant loneliness and isolation in the ACT community. [The Living Well in the ACT Region](#) survey shows that in 2023 almost one in three Canberrans felt lonely often (8.8%) or sometimes (26.9%) This survey and [The Vital Signs Canberra 2021](#) shows that the groups who are significantly more likely to report low levels of traditional social connect are the LGBTIA+ community, the communities that have lived in the ACT less than three years, those living in apartments, those aged over 65, males, those living with a moderate or severe disability, those with caring responsibilities and those born overseas.

In the ACT, First Nations peoples face disadvantage, discrimination and inequitable outcomes across many areas including housing, child protection, justice, healthcare,

¹ [The extent and nature of poverty in Australia \(aph.gov.au\)](#) (2023), accessed 2nd February 2024



employment, and education. These areas of disadvantage inevitably impact upon community building, social relationships and isolation. It is important to highlight that, across Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people score lower on all dimensions of social connectedness, with an overall index score 39% lower than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians consistently exhibit much lower levels of trust across all dimensions of interpersonal trust based on responses to survey questions that primarily reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's engagement and trust with the wider Australian community. We note survey questions are framed from a Western perspective and unable to capture the strong connections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to family, community, culture and the land.²

Opportunities for the ACT Government to support organisations and individuals to address loneliness and social isolation and improve social connectedness in the ACT community.

The costs of loneliness and social isolation, in both economic and personal wellbeing terms are substantial. A crucial aspect to addressing loneliness and lack of social connection in the ACT is the role played by the community sector, including community mental health services; domestic, sexual and family violence services; homelessness services; legal assistance services; alcohol and other drug services, and a variety of crisis and disaster response services. In the [2023 ACT Community Sector Snapshot](#)³, community organisations stated that social isolation was one of the top four challenges of the people and communities that they support. These organisations have workers interacting with people experiencing significant isolation and loneliness and are often at the very frontline of the ACT's most lonely and isolated. However, the overall service system is often ill-equipped to respond to those seeking support.

Increase funding of the community sector services

The current funding level for community organisations has produced severe resource limitations, making it increasingly difficult to provide essential services to people. As a result, providers often report an inability to address the multiple unmet needs of service users due to limited sectoral capacity and the fragmented structure of service systems. The [Counting the Costs Report](#)⁴, noted that 84% of community sector organisations in the ACT have indicated that their current funding is not sufficient to adequately respond to increasing demand for their services and 39% reported that

² A Duncan, D Kiely, A Mavisakalyan, A Peters, R Seymour, C Twomey and L Vu (2021), [Stronger Together: Loneliness and social connectedness in Australia](#), Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre Focus on the States Series, November 2021, accessed 6 February 2024.

³ N Cortis and M Blaxland, [At the precipice: Australia's community sector through the cost-of-living crisis](#), Australian Council of Social Service, April 2023, accessed 26 January 2024.

⁴ N Cortis, M Blaxland and E Adamson, [Counting the Costs: Sustainable funding for the ACT community services sector](#), ACT Council of Social Service, 11 February 2022, accessed 26 January 2024.



staff were required to perform tasks above their classification due to lack of funds. The report also recommends that the ACT should continue to prioritise early intervention and preventative models, recognising that responding to risks early reduces subsequent resource requirements and pressures and ACTCOSS is pleased to see in [The ACT Government Response to the Counting the Costs: Sustainable funding for the ACT community service sector](#), the Government has agreed to this recommendation. ACTCOSS looks forward to seeing the details of loneliness and isolation early intervention and preventative programs being implemented.

Community sector organisations are key to the ACT Government's approach to reducing loneliness and isolation, particularly for individuals and communities who are unable to access mainstream services due to accessibility, affordability, cultural or social concerns. Provision of sustainable, effective wraparound services for vulnerable people will require increased investment in the community sector.

ACTCOSS welcomes the longer contracts the ACT Government has offered to the community sector such as the newly commenced Community Assistance Temporary Supports (CATS) program. ACTCOSS recommends that longer term funding agreements, with indexation and appropriate review points, with the community sector be continued and expanded to ensure staff retention, service quality, data collection and sector stability that flow from longer contracts.

Currently, there is a dearth of programs offered that are specifically targeted at reducing loneliness and social isolation. Additional funding is required to expand existing programs or create new ones. There is another opportunity to incorporate loneliness and social isolation reduction components into existing programs which have an alternative focus.

Recommendation 1: Provide increased funding to community organisations to effectively respond to loneliness and isolation in the community to deliver early intervention and preventative programs to reduce loneliness and isolation.

Recommendation 2: Fund Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to build capacity to deliver culturally appropriate services to address loneliness and social isolation.

Strengthen Community Sector Workforce Capacity

Currently, many people experiencing loneliness and social isolation use community sector services, yet these frontline workers are not adequately equipped or resourced to respond.⁵ The [Ending Loneliness Together in Australia](#) report has a call to action to equip community sector service providers and particularly front-line staff to identify, monitor, redirect, or intervene with respect to individuals at risk of loneliness. This can be done via direct training of workers who see individuals who are lonely. Support is also needed for the community sector on how to measure

⁵ Ending Loneliness Together, [Ending Loneliness Together in Australia White Paper 2020](#), November 2020, accessed 23 January 2024.



loneliness and guidelines should be developed for screening and measuring loneliness in children, adolescents, and adults.

Recommendation 3: Provide funding to build community sector worker skills through specific loneliness and isolation training so that they are better equipped to deal with clients experiencing loneliness and isolation.

Expand the ACT Community Directory

ACTCOSS recommends that the [Community Directory coordinated by Volunteering ACT](#) be enhanced and expanded to strengthen its ability to connect community members and service providers with programs and services that tackle loneliness and social isolation. This process should involve co-design with relevant stakeholders to ensure enhancements are appropriate and fit for purpose.

The ACT Government should also commit to more proactively promoting the Community Directory internally to increase awareness of the Directory's purpose, functions and content, and to avoid duplication. Funding is also required to raise awareness amongst the general public of the Community Directory and how it can help them through a targeted marketing campaign, designed and developed in collaboration with the sector.

The Directory can also assist to facilitate social prescribing services.

Recommendation 4: Provide additional funding to expand and enhance the Community Directory

Recommendation 5: Actively promote the Community Directory within ACT Government

Recommendation 6: Provide funding for a marketing campaign to raise public awareness of the Community Directory

Strengthen Local Community Building

Community development programs that are place-based and community-led play a crucial role in fostering social connections, improving mental health, creating a sense of belonging among community members, and preventing loneliness and isolation. ACTCOSS recognises the many community-building programs that the ACT Government is funding and the positive impact of these initiatives have on reducing isolation and building local communities.

ACTCOSS recommends long-term funding and expansion of programs to address issues of loneliness and isolation across all areas of Canberra and to enhance social well-being. Long-term funding is essential for the sustainability and effectiveness of community programs. It allows for continuity, planning, and the development of a more comprehensive approach to tackling complex social challenges and reducing loneliness and isolation. Expanding initiatives to areas where there are specific



issues of loneliness and isolation requires a targeted and strategic effort to address the unique needs of different communities within Canberra.

Loneliness is a complex social, health and economic issue and is a consequence of a multitude of factors⁶ and solutions will differ across different communities and individuals. A one-size-fits-all solution will not work. Therefore, the ACT Government should provide avenues for people to have a direct say in their area's social resources through higher levels of community engagement, community development programs and facilitation of community led initiatives. To ensure that solutions to loneliness and isolation are appropriate to the local community, local leaders and groups should be supported to design meaningful solutions for their communities and more grant opportunities that are targeted for local community organisations who know their community needs and solutions best should be provided. An example of this is the Queensland Government [Communities Innovation Fund: Responses to Social Isolation and Loneliness](#) that encourages innovative programs that create meaningful connections for people experiencing social isolation and loneliness.

The Community Development Program funded by the Community Services Directorate is scheduled to undergo commissioning soon. As part of this process ACTCOSS recommends the needs and gaps concerning loneliness and isolation to be considered.

Recommendation 7: Provide long term funding for ACT community development programs so they can be expanded to where the need is highest across the Territory.

Recommendation 8: Ensure community engagement strategies and initiatives are community led and designed with solutions relevant and appropriate to that community, including through expanding grant opportunities for community organisations to locally address loneliness and isolation.

Recommendation 9: Ensure the commissioning of the Community Development Program subsector incorporates recommendations from this Inquiry into the discovery process.

Opportunities for the ACT Government to integrate improving social connectedness into other areas of policy making.

Develop an action plan: Building Community Connectedness

ACTCOSS recommends that the Government develop an action plan across Directorates to work towards building an inclusive and well-connected ACT. The plan would include clearly defining social isolation and loneliness and developing targeted

⁶ Ending Loneliness Together, [Ending Loneliness Together in Australia White Paper 2020](#) November 2020 accessed 23 January 2024



strategies to address the groups who are significantly more likely to report low levels of traditional social connection in the ACT. A taskforce of Government, community sector and individuals should be established, and funding be dedicated to the implementation of the actions.

Recommendation 10: Develop an action plan to build community connectedness with a taskforce and funding attached.

Planning and the Built Environment

The places where people live, work and play can promote meaningful social interactions and help build a sense of connection. Careful planning and management of these places can create population-wide improvements in loneliness.⁷ Studies across the world have shown various features of the built environment, such as distances to services, walkability of surroundings, transport disadvantage, perceived safety of an environment and availability of green space are related to reported levels of loneliness.⁸ The ACT Government town planning measures relating to infrastructure, green space, housing, access to transport and community facilities need to support strong social outcomes. These planning approaches need to be place-based and community focused to prevent and respond to social isolation and loneliness.

Public spaces are a social resource and shared public spaces draw communities together and provide important opportunities for social engagement. It is important for the ACT Government incorporate more “third spaces” within our city with areas where people can come and go and connect without obligation or necessarily spending money. These spaces include libraries, community centres, youth centres, dog parks, skate parks, outdoor gym equipment, community art centres, markets, gardens, community gardens, men’s and women’s sheds, shopping areas, parks, sporting facilities and playgrounds.

Recommendation 11: Conduct an audit of “free of charge” community and recreational spaces across the ACT and increase these spaces where they are identified as being needed.

Housing

Housing for the community needs a people- and community-focused approach to strengthen community members ability to connect and bond. Housing should be designed to reduce loneliness among residents. The Common Ground community housing project is a good example of this. The model supports people to move directly from homelessness into permanent housing and has wrap around support they need to stay housed, to improve their connections to people, health, education,

⁷ JL Kent, EJ Rugel and M Bower, [The cities we create lead to isolation and loneliness](#), University of Sydney, 2 February 2023, accessed 22 January 2024.

⁸ J Lam and S Wang, [Built environment and loneliness among older adults in South East Asia](#), Journal of Applied Gerontology, vol. 41, no. 11, pp. 2382-2391, 8 July 2022, accessed 2 February 2024.



employment, and to live independently with stability in a location that is close to amenities and essential services such as transport, education, employment, retail, health and community services. The incorporation of community gardens, shared living rooms, breakout spaces, playgrounds and areas in which to socialise in the Common Ground model should be duplicated across the ACT.

Recommendation 12: Work with community and housing sector leaders and organisations to expand developing shared living models that facilitate interaction and relationships among residents.

Recommendation 13: Adopt broader housing planning policies that prioritise the creation of environments facilitating neighbour interaction and socialisation to enhance community connections.

Transport

Connectivity between residential areas across a city is essential.⁹ Accessible and affordable transport is key to retaining connections and poor transport infrastructure can be isolating in both physical and emotional terms. Without regular, reliable options for getting around town – from light rail links to bus services to cycle lanes – it can be difficult for people to nurture social connections. The UK Government’s 2018 report [A Connected Society](#) highlights the importance of accessible public transport in tackling loneliness, noting that connectivity is crucial for cultivating relationships between relatives, friends and colleagues, and for facilitating incidental encounters between community members as they run errands or travel to work. Substandard public transport is especially problematic for people with limited mobility, including the elderly, those with disabilities and parents of young children.

The ACT Government should prioritise strategies to expand and develop public transport networks in a way that supports mobility and social cohesion such as expanding the Flexibus service. Partnerships with planners, transport providers and community groups such as the ACT Transport Working Group, can assist the Government to explore how transport can be used to improve social connections.

Recommendation 14: Increase the hours and service areas of the Flexibus service.

Recommendation 15: Continue to support and actively participate in the ACT Transport Working Group.

Recommendation 16: Fund the adequate provision of community transport for activities including traveling to social activities.

Recommendation 17: Trial free public transport for students and concession card holders and analyse the costs, benefits and distributional impact.

⁹ Future Spaces Foundation, [Kinship in the city: Urban loneliness and the built environment](#), Future Spaces Foundation, 2020, accessed 19 January 2024.



Improve data collection and collate evidence-based approaches.

To tackle loneliness successfully, the ACT needs a deeper understanding of who is at highest risk and what is effective in preventing and reducing it. Part of the solution to this is to collect better data on loneliness and measure it more consistently.¹⁰ The ACT needs improved data collection to capture who is most at risk and how to prevent and manage the issue in the community. Furthermore, it is imperative to adopt evidence-based methodologies and best practices to inform future strategies, alongside identifying the social determinants and preventive factors contributing to social isolation and loneliness.

Recommendation 18: Work with the community sector to identify the most suitable tool to measure social isolation and loneliness to gather data for the ACT to assist in the allocation of resources in the future.

Recommendation 19: Increase the scope of data collected via the ACT Wellbeing Framework through expanding the indicators of Access and Connectivity, Social Connection and Identity and Belonging to better inform policy and support better community wellbeing outcomes.

Recommendation 20: Collate best practice research from other jurisdictions in addressing social isolation and loneliness to integrate effective strategies into local initiatives.

Recommendation 21: Expand the ACT Wellbeing Framework indicators to ensure that data relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is comprehensive and relevant to addressing social isolation and loneliness.

Improving supports in education settings

Australians aged 15 to 24 have experienced a steady rise in loneliness which began long before the pandemic. This can possibly be put down to young people more likely to report and admit they have emotional issues, online friends with less face-to-face connections, bullying and the impacts of social media. Research predicts that the long-term rise in loneliness among younger Australians will continue unless effective ways are found to address the trend.¹¹

Addressing loneliness and social isolation in education settings requires a multifaceted approach that involves fostering a culture of belonging and support within schools. It involves providing programs for peer support and mentoring for students, offering mental health resources and support services, and providing education to students about loneliness and social isolation.

¹⁰ Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, [A connected society: A strategy for tackling loneliness](#), October 2018, accessed 19 January 2024.

¹¹ S Marinos, [Australia's young people are getting lonelier](#), University of Melbourne, 12 February 2024, accessed 22 January 2024.



Educators play a crucial role in supporting students' mental wellbeing and can help ensure that students receive the support they need to address feelings of loneliness. Educators need to be equipped with basic training to identify signs of loneliness and isolation and refer students to appropriate services. Systemic initiatives, such as the [Social Work in Schools](#) project initiated by the University of New England in partnership with the NSW Education Directorate, offer avenues for addressing loneliness in educational settings. By integrating social work placements in public schools, this program aims to address the underlying social determinants of health and strengthen the emotional and mental wellbeing of young people. Embracing such initiatives and exploring additional systemic programs tailored to the needs of young Australians is crucial in combating the long-term rise in loneliness among this demographic.

Recommendation 22: Increase personal support and mentoring programs for students within educational institutions.

Recommendation 23: Ensure that schools offer comprehensive mental health resources and support services to students, including counselling services, support groups, and access to mental health professionals.

Recommendation 24: Provide education and awareness programs to help students recognise the signs of loneliness and social isolation in themselves and others.

Recommendation 25: Provide training and professional development opportunities for educators to enhance their ability to identify signs of loneliness and refer students to appropriate resources.

Recommendation 26: Investigate educational initiatives that aim to address the underlying social determinants of health and strengthen the emotional and mental wellbeing of young people.

Social Prescribing

Empirical studies in the UK show the effectiveness of social prescribing to decrease loneliness and indicate that this is an important tool for people experiencing loneliness or social isolation to access supports and services in their area.¹² Social prescribing enables organisations to refer people to a range of services that offer support for social, emotional or practical needs. Social prescribing connects people to community groups and services to help people to overcome feelings of loneliness by connecting people to activities and support within their local area.¹³ The basis of social prescribing comes from a person-centred approach to care, looking at the needs and wider social network of each individual and determining what form of care would be best for them. [The Social Isolation Project](#) established in Queensland showcases a successful social prescription model.

¹² EM Lauria, [More than medicine: Exploring social prescribing in Australia](#), Friends For Good, 2021, accessed 6 February 2024.

¹³ Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, [A connected society: A strategy for tackling loneliness](#).



Recommendation 27: Implement a trial of a social prescription model linked in with the ACT Community Directory.

Recommendation 28: Resource and support Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to develop culturally appropriate social prescribing models.

Community Participation

Community participation plays a pivotal role in fostering vibrant, inclusive, and resilient communities. It is a foundation for building strong social bonds, a sense of belonging among individuals, enhancing personal wellbeing and creates positive change in our communities.¹⁴

Volunteering

Engaging in volunteer work is associated with reduced social isolation. Volunteering can directly prevent and alleviate loneliness, improving wellbeing and social connections for the volunteer¹⁵ and volunteering has been found to help individuals improve self-esteem, relieve stress, alleviate symptoms of depression, and help with mental health recovery.¹⁶ This link is reflected in the ACT Wellbeing Framework, within the Social Connection and Time domains, with volunteering used as a key indicator of Canberrans being connected with family, friends, and community, and having the time to live life well.¹⁷ It is essential that volunteering is recognised by the ACT Government as a pivotal contributor to increasing social connectedness and be supported through funding the ACT Volunteering Strategy.

Recommendation 29: Commit to ongoing funding from all relevant directorates across the Government to support the ACT Volunteering Strategy.

Community Events and Programs

ACT community spaces should incorporate scheduled free community events and programs aimed at fostering social connections that make people feel welcomed, valued, and connected to others. These events and programs should include a diverse array of formats including festivals, cultural events, workshops, group activities, community gardens, men's and women's sheds, and recreational gatherings. It is essential that these initiatives are inclusive and accessible to individuals of all ages, cultures and abilities, providing everyone in the community with the opportunity to participate and cultivate meaningful relationships. The integration of such planned community events and programs within community spaces can create vibrant and inclusive communities where people can come

¹⁴ Scope Australia, [The importance of social and community participation](#), Scope Australia, 23 November 2023, accessed 26 January 2024.

¹⁵ M Flood, [Mapping Loneliness in Australia](#), The Australia Institute, February 2005, accessed 6 February 2024.

¹⁶ Health Direct, [Benefits of Volunteering 2021](#), accessed 26 January 2024

¹⁷ Volunteering ACT, [Canberra's volunteering landscape 2021-2023: Listening report](#), May 2023, accessed 6 February 2024.



together and socially connect. To enhance accessibility and foster local social connections among community members, it's important to distribute these events and programs across the ACT. By dispersing them throughout the region, we ensure that every community member has access to participate and increases the likelihood of building meaningful connections within local neighbourhoods and communities.

Recommendation 30: Increase free community events and programs being held across the ACT to build a sense of community, particularly across regional centres in the ACT.

Thank you

actcoss@actcoss.org.au

02 6202 7200

actcoss.org.au

ABN 81 818 839 988

