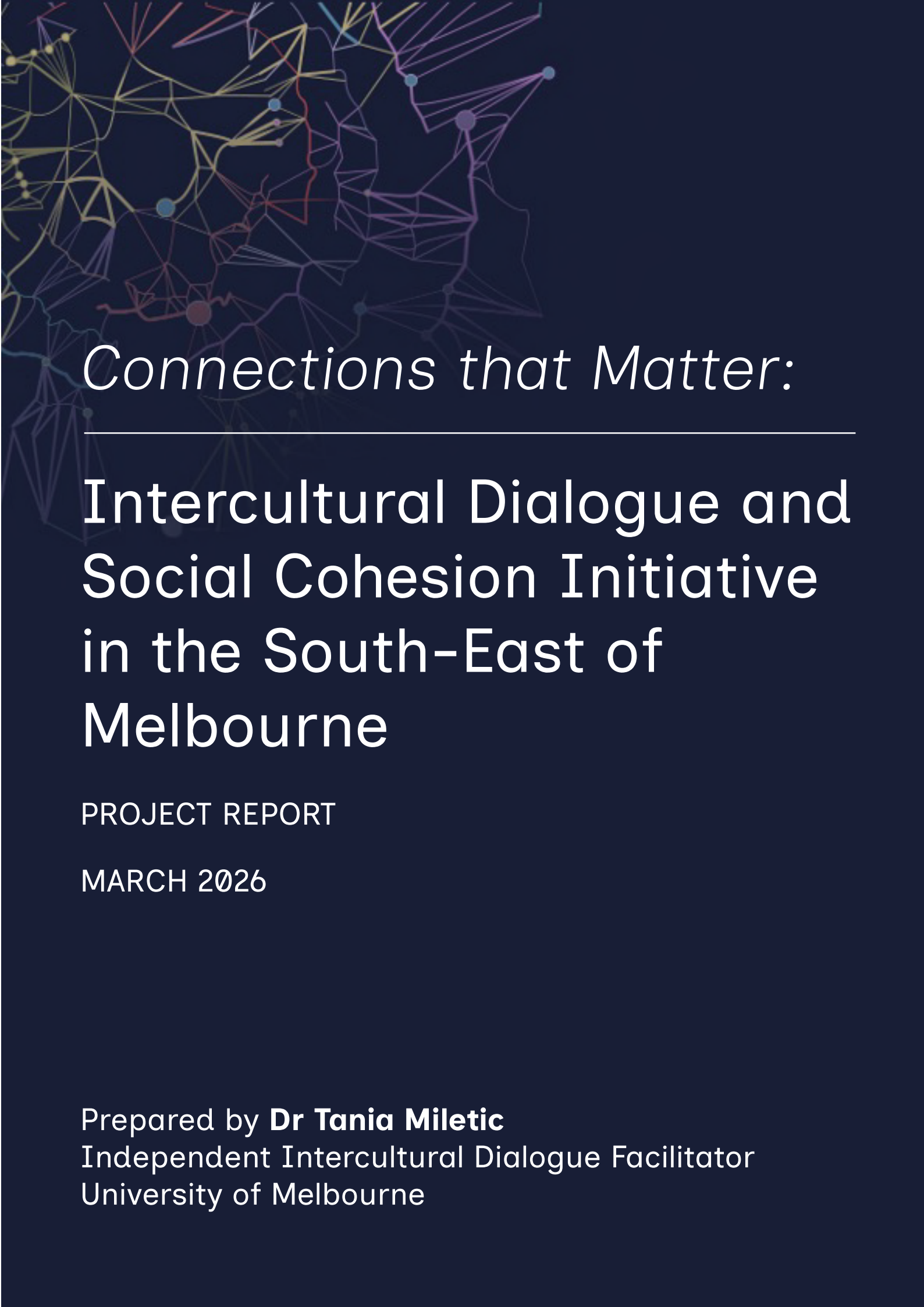




*Connections that Matter:*

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# Intercultural Dialogue and Social Cohesion Initiative in the South-East of Melbourne

PROJECT REPORT

MARCH 2026

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## Executive Summary

This *Connections that Matter* Project Report details the outcomes and insights from the Intercultural Dialogue and Social Cohesion Initiative delivered across the South-East of Melbourne between November 2025 and February 2026. The project was co-designed with a Steering Committee, Working Group and Community Testing Group in partnership with the City of Greater Dandenong, City of Casey, Shire of Cardinia, the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV), the Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC), the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH), the Office for Multicultural Affairs and the Office for Social Cohesion (OSC).

Sixteen facilitated workshops were delivered by Dr Tania Miletic, an independent intercultural dialogue facilitator. Over 150 people who live or work in the local government areas of Greater Dandenong, Casey and Cardinia attended the workshops. The workshops aimed to open safe, dialogical spaces to hear lived experiences, explore what social cohesion means locally, and identify practical ways different people and sectors can strengthen shared life in such a super-diverse region as the South-East of Melbourne.

The Intercultural Dialogue and Social Cohesion Initiative took place during a period of local shocks and stresses and broader pressures such as cost of living and global conflict. Workshops used the Office for Social Cohesion's *Connections that Matter* Guide to frame conversations around a shared vision and four cornerstones for cohesion, to prompt whole-of-society thinking about the roles played by families, community organisations, schools, workplaces, faith groups, businesses, media and all levels of government. This report summarises what was heard, key themes, and practical directions for the next phases of work.

Part One of this Report details what we learned about social cohesion in the South-East and Part

Two discusses the roles we all play, highlighting the need for collaborative efforts across all sectors to build, grow and protect connection across the South-East community.

People in the South-East consistently value feeling respected, safe, connected and able to participate. Rights, everyday democratic practice and the ability to belong were repeatedly named as anchors for identity and belonging. In practice, social cohesion is expressed through everyday relationships of trust, shared values and mutual support, alongside institutional fairness and accessible services that allow people to take part in community life and feel connected.

### Key Takeaways

- **Belonging** is everyday and practical: feeling accepted, able to participate, and able to ask for help. Cohesion is when communities are inclusive, the coexistence of different lived experiences, views and identities.
- **Rights, freedoms and everyday democratic practice** anchor identity and belonging in a superdiverse region.
- **Being fair and just is an aspiration**, not always a reality in that we always have work to make participation and inclusion a reality.
- People envision a strong connected community to be one where you **feel supported especially in times of need** (isolation, crisis, hardships).
- More people from the '**mainstream**' should be involved in discussions of social cohesion.

These strengths coexist with clear pressures. Participants described experiences of racism and other forms of discrimination, language and service barriers for newly arrived people, gaps in affordable housing and rising living costs, and polarising forces online and in the media that can amplify divisions. Such pressures undermine participation and make clear that fairness and inclusion remain ongoing objectives for strengthening social cohesion. Workshop participants asked for more opportunities for inter-community dialogue, more positive and accurate media narratives, and greater resourcing for community-led initiatives that bridge groups rather than placing the burden of cohesion on newly arrived or marginalised people.

Participants described social cohesion in the South-East as a multi-layered phenomenon grounded in everyday relationships, supported by accessible institutions and strengthened by deliberate cross-sector action. Short-term, locally led steps—restorative dialogues, improved translation and interpretation, expanded place-based hubs, and inclusive cultural and sporting programs—must sit alongside longer-term systemic reforms to reduce structural exclusions.

At the personal and family level, belonging and intergenerational relationships shape how people participate. Community organisations, hubs, schools, faith groups, sport clubs and third spaces such as markets and libraries were shown to be vital places for connection, sharing of information and practical support. Workplaces, businesses and service providers were identified as important for creating access to employment and resources.

Local government was seen as uniquely placed in its role as convenor, enabler and investor to catalyse important aspects of building, bridging and linking elements of social cohesion; but this depends on a broader commitment to power-sharing and inclusive

participation across all levels of government and society.

All levels of government were urged to adopt culturally competent practices, embed collaboration into funding streams, and simplify grant processes so community groups and associations can access sustained support. Practical measures such as resourced interpreter services, council transport for intercultural events and transparent feedback on consultations would increase participation and trust. Longer-term structural reforms—on housing, cost-of-living pressures and systemic barriers—are also essential to address the insecurities that erode cohesion. Shared responsibility across families, community organisations, schools, workplaces, faith groups, businesses and all levels of government, when resourced and coordinated, help transform belonging from an individual sentiment into a collective, lived reality.

### Lessons Learnt

Part Two of the report sets out sixteen detailed lessons. In summary, contributors prioritised a small set of practical, place-based levers and cross-cutting principles rather than more programmes:

- **Practical enablers:** routine language access (English classes, interpreters, translations), expanded place-based hubs and local services, and transport and independence supports that reduce isolation.
- **Relational strategies:** civic education rooted in everyday realities, leadership pipelines that reflect lived experience, and regular inter-community dialogue

reinforced by arts, sport and informal activities to build repeated, safe interactions.

- **Institutional reforms:** strengthen local government (including strategically planning across the three LGAs), with convening and participatory practice, reform grant and procurement approaches to favour multi-year, linking investments, invest in culturally competent frontline workforces, and develop conflict-sensitive engagement and restorative mechanisms.
- **Cross-cutting principles:** share responsibility across established groups and institutions, foreground strength-based narratives and multilingual media, ensure visible feedback and follow-through, and prioritise long-term resourcing over episodic projects.

Part Two, "The Roles We All Play", sets out the full sixteen lessons, identifying practical levers — place-based services, routine language access, civic education rooted in everyday life, accurate multilingual narratives and sustained community connections — that collectively strengthen belonging. For policymakers, these lessons point to where coordinated action, shared accountability and longer-term resourcing can most effectively secure durable, place-based social cohesion across the South-East of Melbourne.

## Introduction to the Connections that Matter Workshops

The South-East of Melbourne is one of the most diverse communities in Australia, where everyone is welcome to live together in peace and safety, even when times are challenging.

While communities across the South-East remain resilient, existing disparities and ongoing challenges (such as the cost of living and global conflicts) place very real and sustained pressure on the social fabric that holds them together. This Intercultural Dialogue and Social Cohesion Initiative was initiated at a time when local community connections experienced a number of shocks and stresses, such as anti-immigration movements which put pressure on individuals, families and the broader society.

In response to the concerns that have been heard, and these shocks and stresses, the three Councils of Greater Dandenong, Casey and Cardinia in South-East Melbourne partnered with the Australian Government's Office for Social Cohesion and Office for Multicultural Affairs, the Victorian Government's DFFH, the MAV and the VMC to develop a social cohesion initiative that aimed to build understanding, grow connections and conversations, and protect social cohesion in the local community and region.

The first phase of the project was co-designed with a Steering Committee, Working Group and Community Testing Group representing stakeholders across three levels of government and local stakeholders. The focus of this Initiative is on a series of workshops, which was seen as an important approach to hear from a range of lived experiences and perspectives from across the South-East of Melbourne.

An independent Intercultural Dialogue Facilitator was appointed to deliver the workshops and ensure they were a facilitated, safe space to discuss what social cohesion means for the community today – and the roles each of us can play in shaping a stronger, fairer future.

The *Connections that Matter* (CTM) approach acknowledges that communication and engagement are important steps in building connections, understanding and trust – the foundations of our social fabric and in turn, experiences of social cohesion. While social cohesion requires more than these alone, when done well they can be catalysts which start new conversations, explore wider opportunities, help bridge divides and connect people, organisations, businesses and institutions across society.

The workshops have drawn on the CTM Guide which has been co-created by the Office for Social Cohesion to outline the whole of society communication and engagement to help strengthen social cohesion in Australia. The Guide is designed to continuously grow and evolve in line with feedback and the changing needs of those who use it. The Guide provides an evidence base and practical tools to help communities, organisations, businesses and governments.

- **Build** a deeper understanding of what social cohesion is, the value it brings and role different sectors play
- **Grow** connections and conversations in a way that supports social cohesion
- **Protect** cohesion, togetherness and democratic values during times of shocks

The workshop used the Guide's vision for social cohesion in Australia and the Guide's four cornerstones to help participants discuss their own values, perspectives and suggestions.

The Guide's 'Roles We All Play' which identifies ten arenas of responsibility, was used to stimulate whole-of-society thinking during discussions:

1. Individuals and families
2. Schools, colleges and universities
3. Community groups and associations
4. Arts and cultural organisations
5. Faith-based organisations
6. Workplaces
7. Sports and recreation groups and organisations
8. Media
9. Businesses and institutions
10. Government

The workshops ran for approximately 1.5 - 2.5 hours each, with a focus on what matters to people living and working in the South-East of Melbourne with regards to community cohesion and how we all have roles in how it can be strengthened.

The facilitator's role was to create safe, dialogical spaces where different perspectives could be heard, documented and shared.

The workshops aimed to:

- build a shared understanding of social cohesion and the roles everyone can play
- grow connections between individuals, communities, governments and society

- uncover shared values, lived experiences and perspectives
- empower communities and promote civic engagement.

Sixteen workshops were delivered at different venues across the South-East of Melbourne. There were workshops that focused on broad community engagement as well as focus group workshops. Members of the Working Group helped foster and invite participation. Participants could register online and in-person. Workshops were open to anyone living or working in the three council areas to ensure broad participation. Approximately 150 people across sixteen workshops participated. The workshops targeted broad community participation and multi-sectoral participation. A list of Connections that Matter workshops held across the South-East of Melbourne (Nov 2025 – Feb 2026) is provided in **Appendix 1.**

All sixteen facilitated workshops used the same format of structured dialogues, small-group discussions and reflection. Outputs combined registration and post-workshop surveys, facilitation notes, participant anecdotes and stakeholder feedback. The

## Australia is a strong, connected society with a robust democracy, built on respect and a fair go for all



**Figure 1:** Vision and cornerstone of the Connections that Matter social cohesion engagement guide developed by the Office for Social Cohesion, Department of Home Affairs



facilitator and project team collated and analysed notes to identify themes and recommendations.

A limitation to participation was the timing of the initiative, late November through February, which is the end of year period into the holidays. The team found it difficult to schedule workshops during this time and participants who may have wanted to participate found it difficult to attend due to competing commitments. Participants who attended generously committed their time to thoughtful engagement on what binds people as a community, the shared values and priorities that exist and where there are opportunities to strengthen cohesion.

### Monitoring, Learning and Evaluation

The Facilitator worked with a sub-group of the Working Group to design a series of touch points for monitoring and evaluation during the workshops.

These include:

- A short set of questions at registration
- Action learning across workshops
- Post-workshop evaluation
- Post follow-up feedback.

### Pre-workshop Survey

Most people responded with levels of agree to neutral in relation to the three questions gauging whether people felt their “neighbourhood has a

strong sense of community” (76%), feel like “you belong in your local community” (79%) and “you feel that you are able to have a say on issues that are important to you in your local area” (77%).

These results are not inconsistent with the types of patterns seen in other indices such as the Scanlon Foundations Index. For example, recent reports suggest approx. 80% of Australians agreed they felt a sense of belonging in their local neighbourhood<sup>1</sup>; as well as the anecdotal and Working Group perspectives that recognise the need to understand better what characterises strengths in community cohesion, belonging and civic participation.

Of the participants who registered, the stated motivations for attending the workshop included a hope to explore social cohesion in the current environment and hear different perspectives. For example: *“to better engage in good faith conversations around race, culture and immigration and implement this into both my work and personal life.”* Or with specific reference to their sector: *“How I can encourage social cohesion in my health promotion work within school communities.”*

### Action learning across workshops

The Facilitator and members of the Working Group who attended, debriefed after each workshop and made adjustments as needed to reflect action learning.

For example, action learning from initial workshops and adaptations to subsequent ones included: arriving with time to speak and meet people; reduce

<sup>1</sup> O'Donnell, J., Guan, Q. & Prentice, T (2024). Mapping Social Cohesion 2024. Melbourne: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute. <http://scanloninstitute.org.au/mapping-social-cohesion-2024>

or avoid doing on arrival paper registrations; responding to diverse needs and language levels, reducing slide content and number, spending time with groups for evaluations. Flexibility – such as adjusting for interpreting; increasing languages with translations and reproduced materials; keeping online workshops to 1.5 hours with different format for group reflections and sharing.

### Post-workshop Evaluation Survey

The focus of the post-workshop evaluation was to ascertain how participants experienced the facilitated discussion of social cohesion, how the workshop may have improved understanding and the roles we all play; and whether the workshops were a safe and

conducive opportunity to listen to others and share perspectives; and make new connections.

One of the most powerful evaluation takeaways from the workshop series, was the value participants often found in sharing stories and making connections with people they would not usually meet with. This extended to the sector-focused workshops, where even though participants were part of the one organisation or sector, they reported not having had the opportunity to talk about connections that matter with each other.

The workshop evaluations, reflected by the combined responses of strongly agree and agree, express the value and importance of opportunities for listening to and sharing different perspectives about community cohesion with others, especially those you

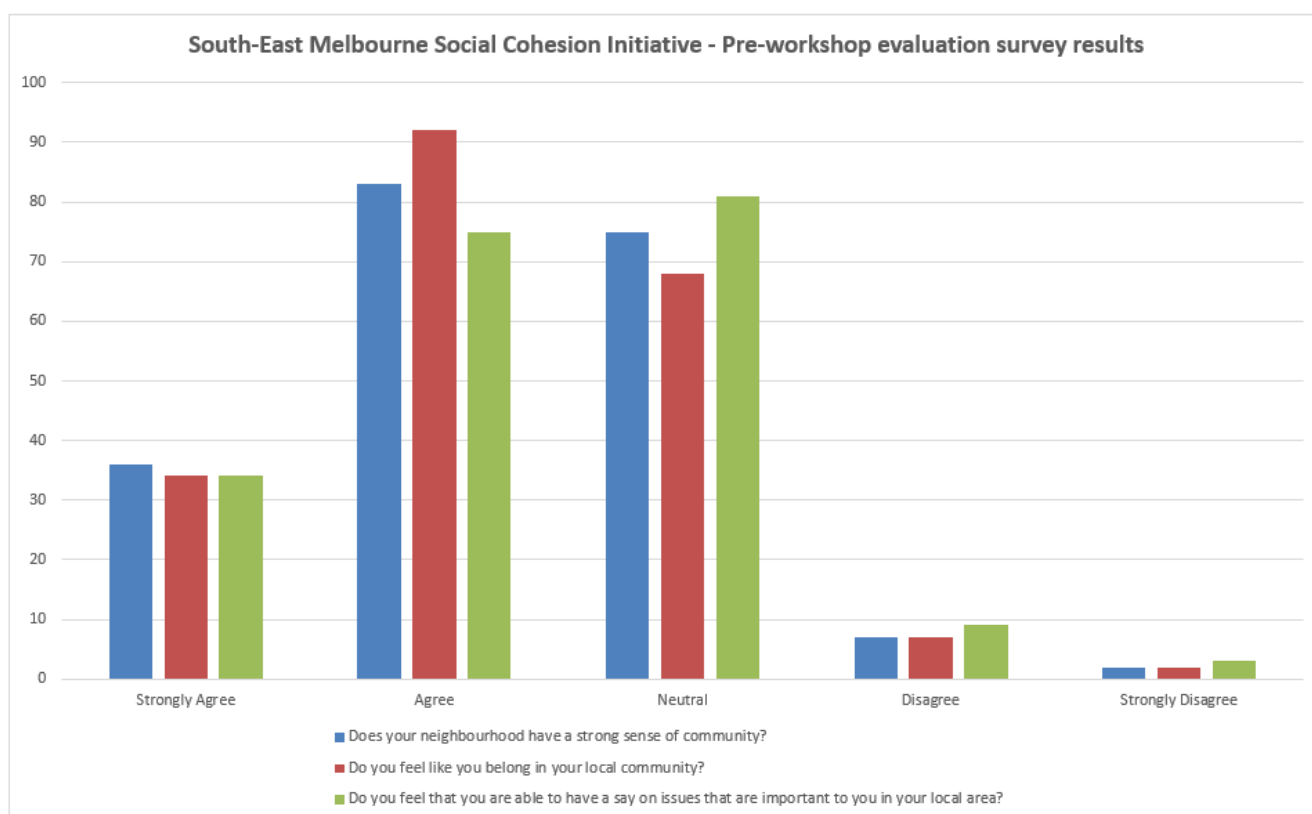


Figure 2: Pre-workshop evaluation survey

may not otherwise have an opportunity to connect with.

Some examples of participants who *agreed*, reflected:

“I have always been supporting and advocating for social cohesion and promoting harmony. It was good to learn everyone else present shared the same or similar views. It gives me more energy and confidence to talk more about it and keep the advocacy continued.”

Some examples of participants who strongly agreed, reflected:

“I desire to be more proactive with inclusive behaviour and attitudes with all I meet. I will call out behaviour and attitudes that are expressed in my company that go against social cohesion.”

For someone who strongly disagreed, the qualitative response was nonetheless affirming:

“It was good because we got information”; “We came together and talk together; It was good and if we can have more workshops”.

Some of the suggestions for future workshops including more clarity of their purpose and aims; more time and opportunity for diverse community members participating; and:

“Don’t run it during the holiday period!”.

### Feeding back key insights

For all interested participants, a verbal online feedback session was undertaken in February 2026. Draft findings and feedback on workshop outcomes were shared with the Community Testing Group and Working Group prior to final drafting of the Report.

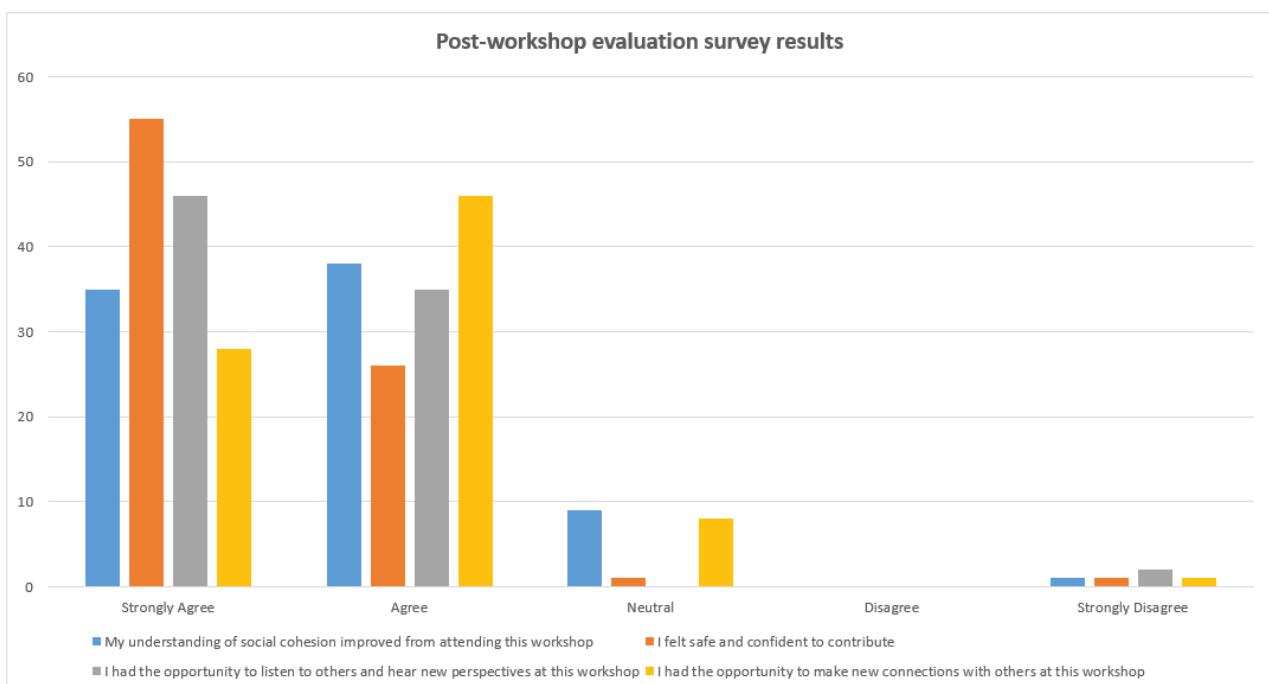


Figure 3: Post-workshop evaluation survey

## Part I – What we learned about social cohesion in the South-East

Shared values, experiences and cultural perspectives that shape the identity of the South-East local area focused on the importance of feeling valued, respected, connected and supported. A focus on support shows up as people helping one another, working to improve safety and equity, and solving problems together. People recognise that talking about a vision for greater social cohesion, means that we acknowledge there is often a gap between espoused ideals and grounded realities.

Rather than focusing on definitions of ‘what social cohesion’ means, the *Connections that Matter* co-designed definitions were used as a useful entry into the discussion and the grounding introductory activity raised in people’s own words what matters to one’s sense of community and cohesion. We grounded our discussions by what comes to mind when we think about our community/ies and related this to the co-design *Connections that Matter* vision for social cohesion and the four cornerstones, which we viewed through the experiences of individuals, groups, communities, institutions and government (all levels).

People mostly talked about daily, grounded expressions of ‘democratic values’, and how our rights and freedoms were seen as central to our sense of identity and belonging. In a superdiverse area, there were many stories about the ongoing obligation placed on all Australians, no matter their background or how they arrived at calling Australia home, to understand and respect one another and the work needed to make society more inclusive. Participants stressed that cohesion should be a shared responsibility, not a burden placed on recently arrived or marginalised communities.

Whilst social cohesion requires a whole-of-society approach, many people noted the need for our institutions and government (all levels) to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimising disparities, and avoiding polarisation. In recognising the importance of social justice and inclusion, community and faith organisations and other sectors, such as service providers and sports and recreation, were also seen to have a role in addressing inequality — such as racism, and costs of living pressures.

People worried about the different meanings of social cohesion and how these can mask **different agendas** or goals. For example, many people value social justice and felt that existing inequities lie at the heart of barriers challenging community cohesion. Some participants suspect that government use of the term social cohesion equates with a more assimilationist approach to harmonising differences rather than addressing social justice concerns. Some participants from the service provider workshop talked about the ways that terms like social cohesion replicate earlier iterations of social policy shifts such as ‘multiculturalism’, whilst maintaining existing social relations, despite longstanding suggestions that require deeper cultural or systemic changes. For example, some felt they had been saying similar things about barriers and opportunities to community cohesion for ‘decades’ and social cohesion was another term for discussing the same issues. These participants viewed social cohesion programming as ‘not touching’ some of the deeper issues, continuing to overlook power relationships, politicised grievances, hierarchies and other salient dimensions of social structure, thereby limiting the transformative potential for growth and meaningful change.

In relation to this, a common sentiment expressed in the workshops was that more people from the ‘**mainstream**’ should be involved in discussions of social cohesion to share the burden more equitably.

Mainstream groups were often inferred to mean people who felt more part of established communities or who were viewed as more enabled within the existing system and hierarchies of power. Similarly, it was believed that one of the barriers to engaging more established communities was that some may feel threatened in their positionalities, which can lead to pushback against greater equity and inclusion as goals of social cohesion. Selective concern and use of social cohesion narratives also make people feel that some groups, more than others, are protected or problematic. People acknowledged how this already plays out when political leaders incite anti-immigration sentiment, amplified by narratives in the media that can actively work against the promotion of social cohesion and can undermine some of the community trust.

### Shared values

In the South-East of Melbourne, when talking about one's community/ies and vision people often talked about the importance of **feeling valued, respected, connected, safe and supported**. People valued the rights, freedoms and responsibilities that relate to being an Australian citizen (though not all have that status yet) as important anchors for these values.

***“We’ve shared that living with our differences is a strength, not a weakness. We want to be Australian and be proud of our heritage and not feel they disadvantage us.”***

Importantly, people discussed and emphasised daily, local expressions of democratic values — rights, freedoms and responsibilities. For many Australians who have had to resettle here due to

violence and persecution based on their race, religion or gender, the rights and dignity enshrined in Australian law and society are deeply valued.

Workshop participants indicated there is a need for increased **civic education** (for everyone) about what we mean by democratic values, rights, and responsibilities. We need to understand the systems we work within to be able to influence them.

**Trust** is often described as an amorphous concept, emerging in various ways as people spoke about connections and how they feel about one another. When trust is eroded, those everyday connections fray: people withdraw, cooperation falls away, and the capacity for coming together and support weakens. Scholarly work on social cohesion highlights the importance of high levels of horizontal trust (between community members and groups) and vertical trust (across institutions and levels). In practice, however, trust is not a single thing — it is produced and sustained by a combination of values, processes and structures that are adapted over time. When any of those elements break down, trust can decline. Trust came up in relation to beliefs about others’ competence and reliability; expectations about how people and institutions will behave; a willingness to be vulnerable and take interpersonal risks; emotional dimensions such as feeling respected, safe and understood. Because trust is multi layered, its erosion looks different in different contexts and requires responses that attend to values, transparent processes and stable structures.

Many communities in the South-East have had different, often negative encounters with authorities. There were stories shared of how authorities in Australia can also be perceived negatively due to immigration and resettlement experiences. There was a perception that government agencies need to

work on developing trust, and communities need better exposure to how authorities work in Australia.

People described community cohesion as arising when communities are **inclusive**, and capable of accommodating the coexistence of diverse lived experiences, perspectives and identities. People value inclusivity, but barriers remain for recently arrived community members and those experiencing forms of discrimination and racism, meaning some people feel more excluded and less connected than others.

Participants indicated that in order to strengthen inclusivity, workshops like these need to include people who see themselves as what several participants described as ‘**mainstream**,’ ‘white,’ Anglo-Saxon communities or part of the more established migrant communities. Discussions about social cohesion that are perceived to be focusing on people who are new to Australia or those who are most impacted by racism or exclusion, only reinforces the sense that they carry the ‘burden’ of social cohesion.

Rather, participants emphasised a whole-of-community approach needed for inclusivity – one that strengthens connections between people and promotes understanding and empathy for the diverse experiences of those living and working in the South-East. Others noted that the capacity to meet the needs of people supports the strengths of such diversity. As one participant noted in a discussion of the cornerstone - *our differences make us stronger* - this resonates less when it feels that differences make us weaker – i.e. services and infrastructure not coping with population growth and migration/settlement needs.

### Identity, place and belonging

The workshops opened with an acknowledgement of the Bunurong, Boonwurrung and Wurundjeri

Peoples of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters of South-East Melbourne, recognising their ongoing cultural presence, stewardship and authority; we also acknowledged the deep knowledge and practices developed over at least 65,000 years that continue to sustain Country and its peoples, and from which we have much to learn.

We recognise First Nations peoples and note that subsequent waves of immigration have shaped South-East Melbourne into a super-diverse multicultural region. Identity and belonging are complex and intersectional — a recurring theme in the workshops was the shared yet multiple reality that we are **all Australian while also holding many cultures, languages, heritages and identities**. Participants emphasised the need for greater understanding and empathy for people’s lives, their connections to place, and how individual and collective stories evolve over time. Many highlighted the importance of the **right to self-identify** across multiple, sometimes changing, intersecting identities, noting that people from the same country of origin can nevertheless identify differently along ethnic, cultural or linguistic lines.

In the South-East, like other parts of Australia, there are individual, family, community and national factors that shape intersecting identities and belonging. Community identities are negotiated within families (intergenerationally for example), communities (different ethno/linguistic, religious formations) and through social policy and laws. For example, it was not uncommon for parents and young people to recognise that within their own families there are different ways of integrating cultural and linguistic heritage and a sense of belonging.

**Belonging** is everyday and practical, and includes feeling accepted, being able to participate, and being

able to ask for help. It also functions as an anchor, shaping how people identify and connect to others, reinforcing social bonds and supporting both psychological and social wellbeing.

***“Younger generations growing up in Australia tend to minimise these cultural or linguistic differences and the divisions they can create, more readily coming together across ethno-linguistic lines like a rainbow family. We have different ways of understanding our identities in Australia than our parents.”***

[Youth Participant]

Australians are connected through heritage and relational networks to all parts of the world. When there are global conflicts or events that happen abroad, we see many communities affected. Many participants from refugee backgrounds value Australian rights and protections but emphasised that some of the anti-immigration sentiment, challenges with resettlement and intra-community tensions and divisions impact on personal, family and inter-community wellbeing.

Belonging was reflected in the workshops in stories that connected to the historical and cultural tapestry of the South-East and was shaped by the many ways people identify with each other, their environment and shared values. Throughout the workshops, community members, groups and associations spoke about the important contributions different communities have made to the area over time.

**Sharing stories** and storytelling were seen as important ways to increase empathy and understanding of one another. Many Australians carry stories of hardship, war or persecution that coexist with resilience, courage and transformation. For First Nations Australians and people from refugee back-

grounds— including recently settled communities in the South-East, those who have arrived because of forced displacement, persecution or war, and some service providers — greater understanding of these complex realities enhances social wellbeing. Many

#### **Case Story:**

*A man shared his experiences of coming to Australia, unaccompanied as a young man from Europe. In those years, he recalls there was no café on the main road heading out of Dandenong, so he was proud to have helped establish the first. He also spent early years establishing a community association for people from his birthplace and helped establish and run its language school. Over many years he has volunteered to keep this going and growing. As a retiree now, he noticed a friend and neighbour who was feeling unwell and lonely, unable to even attend his (different cultural association) community events. He offered to drive his friend to the Saturday meetings even though he didn't know the language or the cultural and religious traditions. He was welcomed as a friend and came to love attending the Saturday meetings and accepted invitations to events and festivities. It helped his friend but also transformed his own thinking about making intentional connections across different community groups and associations. He suggested we add to our report the idea that community groups and associations think about making one of their members responsible for looking at opportunities for connecting with other associations, the same way you might have an engagement officer to reach not just within your cultural group but to others.*



people felt there **was too little opportunity** to share experiences across our groups and sectors which would support community cohesion. People felt that more effort was needed to ensure there is space for a diversity of perspectives and positions that reflect the multilayered identities of modern Australians. The value of having opportunities, like the workshops, for respectful dialogue about identity, belonging and place which are complex, fluid and often political is welcomed.

#### **Language, respectful dialogue and naming practices**

The **words we use matter**, so too does the ability to communicate in English (especially for new arrivals) and to dialogue with one another respectfully. As was discussed earlier in relation to identity and belonging, how we define ourselves, others and places can signal inclusiveness or exclusion.

**Language access is central to inclusion and safety. Naming practices matter: how people and places are described affects dignity, service access and trust.**

Listening to one another is central to learning and connection. People explored methods to improve the ways we communicate with one another, in the streets and schools, workplaces and our encounters with businesses and services. There was discussion about the need to change some of the narratives that don't serve connection and cohesion, as part of the work ahead.

Too few positive stories are shared and the many strengths of the South-East community are often undercelebrated. People called for greater recognition of positive community contributions, including

addressing historical misrepresentation and promoting more accurate narratives through the media and other information sources.

#### **Suggestions**

- Promote inter-community initiatives: community dialogues, arts exhibitions, shared sports and cultural events, storytelling workshops to foster connections and build mutual understanding.
- Focus on community cohesion being affirming and applying to everyone, through promoting new (strength-based) narratives, especially linked to enhanced opportunities to share our stories, including through the media and digital platforms. Highlight the many positive stories and contributions that reflect lived experiences in the South-East.
- Develop more localised sensitivities to the ways people want to be identified so that schools, service providers and local government staff and councillors reflect cultural competencies.

#### **Supporting new arrivals and settlement pathways**

The South-East has a strong network of community organisations, services and government programs that aim to support the diverse needs of newly arrived community members. In relation to social cohesion, there were many references to the ways that language shaped community experiences and outcomes, from English language learning opportunities as a key factor in feeling accepted and



acknowledged, to being able to participate in civic life and having equitable access to existing services. Women in particular emphasised the multiple barriers to social cohesion related to language and communication. People shared lived experiences of how language barriers affect legal and health outcomes, as well as community integration.

People also suggested increasing access to translated materials and interpreters in a wider range of local languages where possible. Concerns were raised about access to services - particularly for people on temporary visas - with long waitlists for doctors and dentists, and the need for more interpreters identified as ongoing issues. Considerations for access to information on service navigation, visa pathways and family reunion were seen as ways to reduce stress and marginalisation on women and families.

**Community hubs and school-based programmes support early engagement and trust-building with services. We need better pathways from school to work, more opportunities to connect with businesses and placements for younger people**

There was a sense that access and equity remained a problem for people struggling with barriers to housing, employment, language services, immigration support. The importance of public transport, including free council buses, was emphasised for community participation. Available and affordable housing was also a key concern.

Women who were participating in an English language class, and joined a workshop shared some of the distinct intersecting challenges and strengths they were experiencing. Access to education, particularly English classes for newly arrived migrants, is crucial. Driving programs to empower newly arrived

migrants, especially women, are seen as vital for integration and independence. There was a call for more child-friendly educational programs to enable women's participation.

***“Good communication between community members is key. We support each other at different stages in life, and there’s a strong emphasis on women helping women. Australian women are seen as strong, this is important for our community’s progress.”***

We heard about the ongoing challenges of social-marginalisation and isolation, compounded by intersectional factors of gender, class, age, health and disability. When thinking about daily life, driving lessons and transport access (especially for people living outside town centres) were highlighted as critical practical enablers for independence and increased connection with others outside the home.

***“We recognise that some of us have only recently become part of our Australian society and that we can recognise the challenges and opportunities ahead. Many of us feel we have experiences to share about what we went through and how time has changed our communities, the challenges we faced and contributions we have***

People described the important ways that councils and local services are well placed in coordinating place-based responses with partner agencies to support community members, highlighting examples such as holistic, child-friendly and culturally appropriate supports to enable new residents to connect with education, employment and community networks.

There was a sentiment that people were not fully aware of the existing range of services and supports available to them. Despite innovative council-led initiatives and services being available, participants felt that awareness of these programs and opportunities to connect with them remains limited.

### Living well together

In the everyday lives of people, social connection means **living well together**. People talked about the many ways they see this in their day to day lives, in the places where they live, work, socialise and study. People recognise that social connection and strong democracies need to be worked on constantly and that everyone has a role to play.



Photo credit: Cardinia Leisure Centre <https://cardinaleisure.com.au>

Community cohesion is nurtured in everyday places (markets, libraries, schools, parks), programmes (women's groups, sports, arts) and street-level initiatives. Third spaces, like libraries and public spaces, provide low-barrier opportunities for strengthening connections and inclusion.

Dandenong Market and libraries were cited as symbols of everyday diversity and inclusion that foster a sense of civic pride. They were seen as important community spaces, with multifunctional use.



Photo credit: Bunjil Place  
<https://bunjilplace.com.au>

Libraries are highlighted as particularly significant for the role they can play in providing access to knowledge, a sense of belonging, and a safe space for exploration and personal growth. Libraries serve as equalisers, offering resources and opportunities to all community members regardless of their background.

***“In Dandenong we know that the market and our shared public spaces allow us to enjoy and celebrate all that is wonderful about our diversity and inclusion. It’s a symbol of our strength in diversity.”***



Photo credit: Dandenong Market  
<https://www.broadsheet.com.au>

***A young man from a refugee background recalled spending considerable time in Dandenong library, reading and “getting lost in information,” becoming open to new perspectives and accessing resources in a safe and welcoming environment.***

There is a recognition that the nature of third spaces is changing, particularly for young people. The observation that “nowadays kids are alone, but connected (via tech)” highlights the shift towards digital third spaces. This change presents both challenges and opportunities for fostering social cohesion, as digital connections can bridge certain divides but may also lead to physical isolation. While the nature of these spaces is evolving, particularly with the rise of digital connectivity, they are important parts of the South-East community. Suggestions for reimagining existing spaces, creating new opportunities for interaction in public spaces, streets, and ensuring inclusivity, third spaces can continue to play a crucial role in building stronger, more cohesive communities.

People talked about the importance of community **celebrations and festivities** in both schools and the workplace that increase the visibility of multiculturalism, and promote connections across different groups and communities, but noted that activities such as sharing food traditions, cultural festivals or special days can sometimes feel too surface-level. People saw existing festivities such as Harmony Week as opportunities to go a little deeper in representing communities and understanding

histories and narratives as shared across diverse community members that may challenge existing ‘assumptions’ or stereotypes. Noting that this has been the experience of many across Australia as part of our migration history, from our first colonial settlers who came from different countries with

cultural and linguistic identities, to our most recently arrived. For example, rather than schools focusing on ‘Country’ as the basis of cultural representations, perhaps opportunities to open space for aspects of diversity that connect to historical or social experiences of people today could be enhanced.

### Spotlight

- School based hubs and programs like Wellspring Women’s Group were valued as child-friendly programming that enables women’s participation in adult education, like English classes.
- Harmony Week activities are significant across the South-East to celebrate cultural diversity, and promote respect and inclusion. The week coincides with the United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on 21 March
- VMC coordinates statewide activities during Cultural Diversity Week
- Dandenong Civic Centre and Bunjil Place were often cited as important community spaces, with multifunctional use.
- The Community Cohesion Hubs at libraries that are funded by the Office for Social Cohesion - see Community Cohesion Programs - The Australian Library and Information Association (See Appendix 2)

There was recognition that more can be done—both within communities and across institutions—to promote intercultural, intergenerational and cross-sector connections, reflecting the bonding, bridging and linking dimensions of social cohe-

sion. Part 2, "The Roles We All Play", explores these ideas in detail and emphasises that strengthening cohesion requires collective effort, with responsibility shared across individuals, organisations and institutions so the relationships that matter are deepened and sustained.

## Part II – Roles we all play

***“Our community means uniting through commonality and core values like peace, safety, and harmony, with a shared vision for our children and future generations. We’re growing together with a shared commitment to a peaceful environment, recognising that the whole world is, in essence, one family”***

The analogy of family came up quite a lot in the workshops. In the same way that family members come to understand their different abilities, qualities, views and purpose, so too they develop ways to cooperate and connect across life’s challenges and changes. A community – like a family – is diverse and strong when it sees its diversity, and the different roles each person plays as a collective strength.

Social cohesion is not the responsibility of any one person, community, organisation or government. It is multisectoral; but that does not happen without work at the different levels. Social cohesion grows when connections strengthen in three ways:

- first, when individuals connect with family, friends, and others in their close circle (bonding);
- second, when they engage with people who may be different from them (bridging); and,
- finally, when they build connections with organisations and governments and institutions (linking).

***“The bonds we form with people in our daily lives and in neighbourhoods and local communities provide the foundation for our social cohesion and collective wellbeing. While not unbreakable and often tested by current events, these bonds are not so easily broken and help weather and safeguard social cohesion through challenging times”***

Scanlon Foundation Mapping Social Cohesion Report 2025

This section provides an overview of participant insights and suggestions from various sectors of society regarding social cohesion. It highlights the interconnected nature of these issues and the need for collaborative efforts across all sectors to build, grow and protect connection across the South-East community.

### Individuals, Families and Caregivers

**Individuals** play a central and vital role in building social cohesion, as reflected in the socio-ecological model below. This model places individuals and families at the core of community dynamics, recognising that personal experiences of belonging have a ripple effect that extends outward to the broader society.

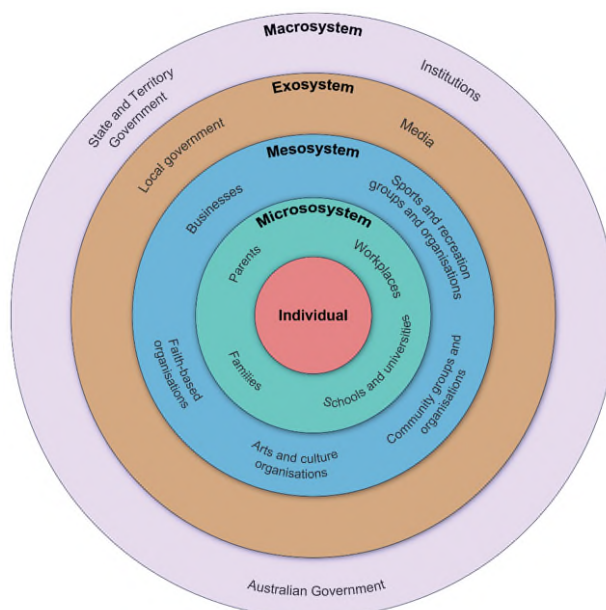


Figure 4: Socio-ecological model in the Connections that Matter Guide, adapted from Bronfenbrenner, U. (1980). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Harvard University Press



Individuals are central to building social cohesion. Respecting one another, recognising ourselves as Australians with diverse heritages — including First Nations peoples — and placing individuals and families at the heart of the socio-ecological model strengthens community dynamics. A strong sense of belonging within individuals and family units ripples outward to improve civic engagement, mental health and mutual support (*Connections that Matter* Guide).

There was recognition of the challenges of working as individuals in the digital realm, whether as people sharing and promoting misinformation, being emboldened to use hate speech or the increasing opacity of what young people are experiencing in their virtual lives (“being alone with others”).

Personal ways people can foster belonging was shared including: by treating others with respect and dignity, by reaching out to people in their family and social lives; and participating in activities that foster connection, sharing stories, reaching out to neighbours and volunteering. These everyday acts help break down stereotypes, create bridges across difference and sustain the values, processes and structures on which trust and cohesion depend.

During our discussions, people talked about the challenges that modern day realities present for parents, young people, community and faith leaders. People felt the sense of belonging that individuals cultivate within themselves and their immediate families and close networks is the bedrock of broader community cohesion. When people feel genuinely connected and accepted, that confidence radiates outwards, shaping their everyday interactions and increasing their willingness to participate in communal life.

Cross-community dialogue and collaboration were linked to the roles of individuals and families, with fostering respect for differences seen as essential to building an inclusive social fabric in which

diversity is not merely tolerated but valued. Active engagement beyond one’s immediate circle enables people to broaden their perspectives through others’ lived experiences and cultural knowledge. Nurturing these connections helps communities move toward greater harmony, so that belonging becomes a collective, shared experience rather than a personal feeling.

#### Case Story:

*An older resident shared her experiences and struggles when she first arrived in Australia and was making her home in the South-East. She described the manifold challenges and opportunities she lived through. After listening to a young man who had recently arrived and was struggling to balance competing resettlement demands on his personal life, family and community, she reached out and empathetically said “hang in there”. They discussed their shared values of multiculturalism and education whilst recognising the register of losses that come with leaving other family and friends and ways of life back home. They told us they had not spoken with a person from one another’s cultural background before the workshop.*

Participants described how everyday choices matter. How people relate to others, respond to difference and use their workplaces and social spaces to include others all affect the cohesiveness of their environment. Individuals contribute to social cohesion by taking part in intercultural conversations, attending community events and seeking to understand diverse viewpoints. By sharing personal stories, histories and cultural practices, people enrich the communal narrative, challenge stereo-

types and create opportunities for mutual understanding.

While structural reforms and policies are critical, individual actions rooted in empathy, respect and active inclusion are the practical forces that people describe to translate those broader measures into shaping and building more opportunity for lived experiences of connection.

were seen as the primary sites where respect, values and cultural knowledge are transmitted and negotiated. By modelling respectful behaviour at home, supporting children's education and engaging with schools, families help young people navigate between their cultural heritage and broader Australian society. Several participants emphasised that the family home is where respect and understanding take shape. From a faith perspective, families are encouraged to "be the light," setting an example of acceptance and kindness that extends beyond their immediate circle.

Families, especially newly arrived residents, also need information about Australian family law, gender equality and domestic violence to protect vulnerable members and promote healthy relationships. Given some of the language barriers and intersecting barriers for women in particular, the importance of increasing accessible and joined-up, close to the community services was highlighted as improving the role of family members.

There are many ways we can understand family and caregiving, and the workshops reflected diverse life stages, family arrangements and normative practices connected to notions of family cohesion. There was a lot of emphasis on family relations between parents and young people, with targeted support for parents and resources that address youth disengagement and efforts that can reduce isolation and strengthen intergenerational bonds.

Within the family, there is a complex interplay to

balance between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to a new societal context. Many multicultural communities express concern about losing their traditions as society moves towards what they perceive as a more homogeneous culture. Families feel tasked with the challenge of maintaining their unique cultural heritage, while also helping their children navigate and integrate into the broader community. This was seen as challenging when families were also part of communities with histories of identity-based divisions and ongoing fractures. The ways that young people understand and engage with their parents and elders are shaped by their own unique circumstances.

In this way, families serve as microcosms of social cohesion. By balancing cultural preservation with adaptation, fostering respect and understanding, supporting education, and navigating intergenerational challenges, families can be seen as sites that lay the groundwork for strengthening connections that matter across different arenas of life. Cross community dialogue and collaboration were seen as linked to the roles of individuals and families, to foster respect for differences and expectations for an inclusive social fabric in which differences are not merely tolerated but valued. Active engagement beyond one's immediate circle enables people to broaden their perspectives through others' lived experiences and cultural knowledge, so that belonging becomes a collective, shared experience rather than a personal feeling.

For parents with school aged children, engagement with schools was seen as vital, as it helps parents understand the educational system and allows them to be active participants in their children's learning journey. Some participants identified the need for more education about family relationships and dynamics in the Australian context. For some, this includes understanding Australian



family laws, particularly around issues such as disciplining children and social norms like sleepovers, which may differ from practices in their countries of origin. For others, there was a need to understand how to navigate the digital sphere, with uncertainty about the responsibilities placed on parents, as well as those of the government, schools, workplaces and media.

There was discussion of the ways families face challenges in this rapidly changing society. Many parents expressed concern about feeling disconnected from their children's experiences, particularly in the digital realm. Some parents describe their children as being 'alone with others' inhabiting meta-physical online territories that they find difficult to navigate or understand. This disconnect can lead to feelings of parents losing agency in their children's lives and can potentially contribute to youth disenfranchisement within the family.

**Young people's** experiences, needs, and contributions are central to building a cohesive society that can thrive into the future. There were a range of issues that surfaced as concerns, especially amongst diaspora communities, who expressed feeling a disconnect between the older and younger generations. People described seeing it at community events – organised by older people and younger people not thought about in relation to their engagement in event organisation and appeal.

Languages spoken by the elders are not necessary understood by young people and are often used at formal community events. It was noted that faith groups are better at considering youth engagement such as mosques who speak more directly to young people.

There was a call for better support systems for young people that **'meet them where they are'**. Education, employment, and career planning support were highlighted as crucial areas by young

people in one workshop. The concept of safe spaces for young people was also emphasised by young participants. These should be environments where young people feel able to discuss difficult issues and feel heard and connected. Such spaces can serve as incubators for ideas and initiatives that promote social cohesion from a youth perspective.

A key insight from young people was the need to engage with youth on their terms. This involves using platforms and creating content that resonates with youth. There is a recognition that young people reflect diverse needs and experiences, sharing a need for adaptive approaches and increased leadership in matters that affect them.

The concept of safe spaces for young people was also emphasised. These should be environments where young people feel able to discuss difficult issues and feel heard and connected. Such spaces can serve as incubators for ideas and initiatives that promote social cohesion from a youth perspective.

There are many examples of important youth-focused initiatives that are co-designed and developed in the South-East. Even within community groups and youth initiatives, it was acknowledged there are challenges when dealing with topics such as inter-communal tensions, taboo topics and family and community expectations. Platforms for youth-led dialogue that allows for facilitated discussions on gender stereotypes and contemporary issues was also suggested. The key is to view young people not just as recipients of social cohesion initiatives, but as active participants and leaders in creating a more cohesive society and important decision-makers.

We heard that by providing support, safe spaces, opportunities for leadership, and platforms to engage on their own terms, communities can harness the energy, creativity, and fresh perspectives of youth. This involves trusting young people with responsibility, engaging with them in their spaces

(both physical and digital), and recognising the valuable contributions they make to community life, the complex environments they are navigating today, and the kinds of innovations they can offer social cohesion efforts. Supporting leadership development for youth expands the pool of decision-makers who reflect lived experience. It is also an essential complement to structural reforms towards power-sharing into the future.

### Suggestions

The South-East local councils could establish a program like the Hume Young Mayors Program to allow some young people (high school aged) more pathways into decision-making on matters that affect community, alongside existing and important youth programs targeting primary school aged children such as Greater Dandenong Council's Junior Majors program.

### Community organisations and associations

Community organisations and associations play a vital role in the South-East region of Melbourne, especially as intermediaries that connect individuals, families and institutions. There are so many examples of how, over many years, community associations and organisations have been developed and positioned to address the diverse needs of communities and facilitate connections both within and between different groups and sectors.

Community organisations are seen to be uniquely positioned to facilitate intra-communal dialogue and conflict resolution, raise awareness of local services and cultural events, and often provide the first point of contact for newly arrived people. Community

organisations take many forms, sizes and structures, and people spoke of the value of these spaces for fostering genuine connection.

These organisations also play a critical role in information dissemination. They help raise awareness about local services and share information about what is available in the community. Additionally, they work to increase understanding of different cultural and religious events important to various groups in Australia, thereby promoting intra- and intercultural awareness and respect. For newly arrived individuals, community organisations often fill crucial gaps in providing essential information. They offer guidance on topics such as gender equality and domestic violence, addressing these important issues earlier in the settlement process than government programs might reach.

People found out about local and community-based services through community networks and information sharing. There was a view that intergovernmental (federal, state and local council) programs and initiatives still had to better connect to community organisations and joined-up service delivery to allow for better outcomes at the community level.

People recognised that communities often create their own systems of support in the absence of adequate government or other services. These grass-roots efforts demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of communities in addressing their own needs. However, there is also a sense of frustration when these community-led initiatives are not adequately recognised or supported, or when government bodies take credit for changes driven by community efforts.

Volunteering was a strong expression of civic engagement. Different forms of volunteering were shared that included formal or informal, regular or occasional volunteering. Volunteering is recognised as a significant source of social capital and commu-

nity cohesion. However, community organisations note that bureaucratic requirements, such as Working with Children checks and police checks, can create barriers to participation in volunteering. There is a need to balance professional standards with accessibility to ensure that volunteering remains an effective tool for social impact and community connection.

### Suggestions

Community organisations and associations can be encouraged to be more intentional in their role of creating 'brinding' connections (whether ethno-cultural, religious or thematic) can limit connections and cooperation. Explore where there might be opportunity for combined functions or events that bring together diverse groups within the community.

Community organisations' role in fostering social cohesion is multifaceted, addressing both the immediate needs of community members and the longer-term goal of building a more connected and resilient society. Strengthening information sharing, streamlining volunteering pathways, being sensitised to linking and connecting, and resourcing community hubs were suggestions to strengthen the potential contributions to social cohesion. Recognising and funding community-led support systems, while ensuring these groups receive proper credit and partnership with government, will enhance local resilience and trust.

### Workplaces

Workplaces are crucial environments for promoting social cohesion, serving as microcosms of society where diverse individuals interact daily. Workplaces

### Spotlight

There are so many examples of how, over many years, community associations and organisations have been developed and positioned to address the diverse needs of communities and facilitate connections both within and between different groups and sectors.

- Afghan Women's Association provides culturally safe spaces where women with heritage in Afghanistan share support, access services and build bridging ties to broader community networks, strengthening social inclusion and agency.
- Neighbourhood houses act as inclusive, accessible hubs offering learning, volunteering and social activities that foster new friendships, cross cultural encounters and local civic participation.
- Multicultural Community Engagement Network is a regional (Casey, Cardinia and Greater Dandenong) network that has over 180 community leaders and bicultural workers that has been successfully meeting since 2020 to improve health and community wellbeing.

are key sites for social connection, economic inclusion and cultural exchange. They have the potential to either reinforce or break down social barriers, making their role in fostering inclusivity and understanding particularly significant.

People believed that workplaces and leadership can foster a culture that emphasises our common humanity, reinforces anti-racism and anti-discrimination policies, and looks for opportunities to build

connections that will enhance workplaces as catalysts for broader social cohesion.

A primary concern for workplaces is creating pathways into employment, especially for school leavers. This transition from education to work is a critical juncture that can significantly impact an individual's sense of belonging and contribution to society. Developing robust programs to facilitate this transition is essential and workshop participants talked about the different roles service providers, council, local businesses and the education sector can play to create better pathways for school leavers and first-time workers through internships, apprenticeships and entry-level roles.

Young people described the need for workplaces to provide opportunities for individuals to gain their 'first' work experience. This could involve internships, apprenticeships, or workshops that help people make connections into workplaces. Such initiatives are particularly important for young people who feel they have intersecting forms of disadvantage and may face additional barriers to entering the workforce.

Safety was raised as of paramount importance in the workplace context. This encompasses not just physical safety, but also psychological safety where all employees feel respected, valued, and free from discrimination. Creating such an environment is crucial for fostering social cohesion within the workplace and, by extension, in the broader community.

One participant noted that the 'Victorian government has a range of psychosocial safety policies and procedures. These often don't translate and people talk of their fear and lack of safety in the community'. The lived experience of not feeling safe in the community also means one does not feel like they belong. This was raised following some racial targeting of religious communities, and felt especially by women.

Addressing discrimination in workplaces remains a critical issue. Despite existing policies, there is often a gap between policy and practice. Participants felt that workplaces need to actively combat labelling, stigma, and appearance-based discrimination. This involves not just having anti-discrimination policies, but ensuring these translate into concrete actions and cultural change within organisations.

Workplaces have the opportunity to recognise and celebrate 'bridge-builders' - individuals who facilitate positive intercultural engagement. There were examples from various workplaces where this was very positive. There were also stories of improvements over time, such as the education sector becoming increasingly diversified and more reflective of the student body and broader community.

Whether a small or large workplace, there was recognition that other than work-related meetings and connections, employees may not yet have had the chance to come together to discuss their role in the community. For example, during a workshop, it was noted that there was a strong sentiment that health services contribute to a shared sense of humanity that goes beyond treating illness. It was the first opportunity to talk about shared understandings of the role of the health sector in a wider discussion of social cohesion.

### **Service providers**

The conversation with service providers highlighted opportunities for better collaboration among sectors, recognising skills, and addressing invisible impacts like improving bridging programs. Challenges such as racism, intergenerational conflicts, and the need for nuanced approaches to mental health were also discussed. The importance of a Federal Multicultural Act to enshrine policies and approaches and government support in integrating services

was emphasised, along with the need for a more holistic and intersectional approach to social cohesion.

It was observed that during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia there were a lot of resources targeted to support community, and that since then resources have lessened.

There were strong examples shared about the different ways that service providers have developed and evolved mechanisms to support better coordination, clearer referral pathways and stronger cross-sector collaboration. Mapping local services, identifying gaps (including material aid and long-term supports) and embedding collaboration requirements in funding and grant-making arrangements would improve outcomes and help build a more responsive and equitable (joined-up) service system.

There was recognition that there may be missed opportunities for place-based servicing. When this happens, there are many benefits. It was suggested that service providers could have better engagement from businesses and the private sector, and this can help alignment with employer and industry needs.

## Businesses and Institutions

**Businesses**, both large and small, have significant potential to contribute to social cohesion, though it appears this potential is not being fully realised. Their role extends beyond providing goods and services to shaping community spaces, creating employment opportunities, and engaging in social impact initiatives.

There is a recognition that businesses could do more to actively promote social cohesion. This suggests that while businesses are integral parts of communities, there is a perception that they are not taking a sufficiently proactive role in fostering connections and understanding among diverse

### Spotlight

- Monash South East Public Health Unit (SEPHU) is committed to improving public health outcomes through regional collaboration with stakeholders across the southeast catchment. As a regional convenor, SEPHU supports local government, community health services, and other prevention partners to build capacity and capability to advance equity in public health delivery.
- VicHealth Local Government Partnership was a statewide initiative where councils and VicHealth worked together to improve mental wellbeing, physical activity, safer, more supportive local environments. Community health services can connect with diverse local groups through place-based outreach.
- Dog parks and Men's Sheds highlighted as good places to connect, and promote social cohesion by offering low-barrier, neutral settings for repeated, informal contact around shared interests. Dog parks encourage spontaneous, cross-demographic encounters while Men's Sheds deepen bonds through purposeful, skill-sharing activities and relationships of support.

groups.

The development of community spaces is highlighted as one way businesses can contribute to social cohesion. The suggestion for more shopping centres in Cranbourne, similar to Fountain Gate, indicates a desire for spaces that can serve as community hubs. Such spaces can provide opportunities

for diverse groups to interact in everyday settings, potentially fostering casual interactions that build familiarity and understanding.

Social enterprise is identified as an area where businesses could have a significant impact on social cohesion. There is a call for greater funding for social enterprises, which often depends heavily on philanthropic donations or government grants. By supporting social enterprises, businesses can contribute to initiatives that often directly address social issues and promote community cohesion.

The engagement of businesses in social impact initiatives was seen as underrepresented. This suggests an opportunity for businesses to more actively participate in programs and projects that benefit the local community and promote social cohesion. Such engagement could range from corporate social responsibility initiatives to more integrated approaches that align business operations with social goals.

There is a noted gap between professional volunteers and paid work opportunities. This highlights a potential area where businesses could contribute to social cohesion by creating pathways for skilled volunteers to transition into paid roles, particularly in areas that have social impact.

While businesses are recognised as having potential to contribute to social cohesion, there is a call for local businesses to take a more active and intentional role linking with other sectors. By viewing social cohesion as integral to their operations and community presence, rather than an add-on, businesses can significantly impact the social fabric of their communities. This involves not just creating economic opportunities and employment pathways, but actively engaging in initiatives that bring diverse groups together, support social enterprises, and contribute to the creation of inclusive community spaces in the South-East.

**Institutions** serve as bridges between diverse communities and broader societal structures. Their approach to identification, language use, service provision, and system navigation can either enhance or hinder social cohesion. By adopting inclusive practices, providing accessible services, and actively working to build trust and understanding, institutions can play a pivotal role in creating a more cohesive society.

Discussions about the effectiveness of institutions in fostering social cohesion was largely oriented to their willingness to listen to and adapt to the needs of diverse communities. This could relate to flexibility in approaches and a commitment to continuous improvement in response to community feedback. When institutions embody these principles, they can significantly contribute to building a society where all members feel recognised, respected, and included.

An example given was the request to be attentive to the nuances of identity and avoid broad, potentially exclusionary labels. For instance, institutions and their policies should adopt more practices such as asking how people prefer to be identified, using non-prescriptive language such as 'communities from [country]'. Others suggest that we become more habituated to assuming we are all Australian, and if cultural or linguistic identification is relevant then an approach should be adopted that acknowledges the complexity of identities and shows respect for individual and group preferences. There was a related call for guidelines on inclusive language to be developed and implemented across various institutions. This would help ensure that all communications, from official documents to everyday interactions, are respectful and inclusive of diverse communities.

### Spotlight

- Community hubs like AMES that are place-based and people-centred way of building connections and social and economic capital within culturally diverse communities. Community hubs help reduce fear and mistrust of institutions like Centrelink and increase access to health and legal services.
- The Dandenong Employment Hub will open 1 July 2026, delivering demand-led workforce and skills support for our diverse community and those facing barriers to employment. It will operate as a concierge service, linking jobseekers with training, employment programs, support services and local employers. The Hub is funded by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations to 30 June 2029, with support from the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions.

### Faith-based organisations

Faith-based organisations and leaders were seen to occupy a unique position in the landscape of social cohesion, serving as bridges between diverse communities, service providers, and government institutions. Their influence extends beyond spiritual guidance of their respective faith communities, encompassing social, cultural, and educational domains.

There was a lot of recognition of the important role faith leaders and faith-based organisations play already in the South-East and beyond. During a

focused workshop, faith leaders, faith-based organisations and members identified the centrality of promoting equality and fairness as a key responsibility of faith groups and leaders, with a strong sentiment that faith communities have a particularly important role in promoting social justice.

Faith leaders are encouraged to be vocal advocates for social justice issues. Their platforms give them significant influence as points of contact within their communities. They can play a vital mediating role between government and community, acting as conduits for information, harmony, and connection. This role is often overlooked but is crucial in building trust and understanding.

However, challenges exist. At the local level, faith leaders often face limited capacity and resources, stretching their ability to engage fully in community-building activities. Bureaucratic barriers can hinder their engagement with schools and other institutions. There is also a recognition that some faith leaders may work primarily within their own cultural groups, limiting opportunities for intercultural engagement even within the same faith tradition.

The changing religious landscape presents another challenge. With a significant proportion of the Australian population identifying as non-religious, there is a question of how spiritual leaders can reach and engage with this segment of society.

The importance of **Interfaith Networks** as linking and bridging connectors across society was raised. The South-East has active networks including: the Interfaith Network of the City of Greater Dandenong (Australia's first Interfaith Network), Casey Multifaith Network and the Cardinia Interfaith Network.

The Network consists of various traditional and multi-faith groups promoting understanding and respect for each other's beliefs by living together in peace and goodwill. There was discussion of a need



for more visible interfaith connections, which can serve as powerful symbols of unity in diversity. These networks have and can leverage their collective influence to effect change at the grassroots level, although it is acknowledged that while such activities are happening, their scope and impact may be limited.



Photo credit: Connections that Matter workshop, Dandenong Interfaith Network, December 8 2025

Interfaith networks play a crucial role in crisis situations, providing a foundation for connection and response. During broad community workshops, it was viewed that faith-based organisations are better at engaging youth than community-organisations often are, given they see engaging young people as critical to their purpose. The focused workshop highlighted approaches that support youth leadership and inclusion, whilst also describing challenges and opportunities for expanding or including new and young members. Opening up discussions - such as through places of worship tours for young people – was suggested as one way to foster intergenerational dialogue and understanding.

Faith communities contribute to social cohesion

by bringing neighbours and volunteers together, often offering multilingual services and fostering inclusion. Highlighting religious and cultural events in community calendars was suggested as one way to increase visibility and create further opportunities for connection.

Collaboration was a key consideration. Amongst participants who identify as being faith leaders or work for faith-based organisations, there is a call for them to work closely with service providers to ensure comprehensive support for their communities. This cooperation can enhance the reach and effectiveness of various social services. This extends to supporting schools, parents, and mentoring programs, contributing to the educational and social development of young people.

### Spotlight

The South-East has active **Interfaith networks** including the Interfaith Network of the City of Greater Dandenong, Casey Multifaith Network and the Cardinia Interfaith Network.

### Sports clubs and organisations

**Sports clubs and organisations** have a unique and powerful potential to contribute towards greater social cohesion in the South-East. They offer spaces for physical activity, social interaction, and community building that can bridge diverse groups and promote shared, positive experiences. These benefits for individuals and communities are strongest when clubs provide safe and inclusive spaces.

Financial barriers, cultural differences, and the need for better communication and education were discussed as some of the challenges faced by local sports clubs and associations. For example, access can mean emphasising the need for community

buses in rural areas; the challenges of running women-only programs and the need for community leaders and groups to advise on appropriate locations; or the importance of educating families about the expectations of sports participation and the need for ongoing communication and support.

Community classes like Zumba are highlighted as excellent examples of how sports and fitness activities can contribute to social wellbeing and connections. These classes offer a fun and healthy way for people to come together, potentially crossing cultural and social boundaries in the process. The success of such programs underscores the potential of sports and fitness activities to create shared positive experiences that can strengthen community bonds.

A consideration that came up during the workshops was for sports clubs to manage different expectations and needs, such as a specific call for women-only places in sports, such as gyms and swimming pools. These spaces allow women and girls to improve their skills in a more comfortable environment, potentially increasing participation from groups that might otherwise feel excluded or uncomfortable in mixed-gender settings.

Accessibility was identified as another crucial issue that clubs and organisations are working to address. Cost and transport barriers can limit participation, therefore strengthening links between sports clubs and other services or sectors could help improve equity and accessibility. For example, one local community association has funded sports uniforms and fees, highlighting the importance of removing financial barriers to participation. By offering low-cost options, sports clubs can ensure that a wider range of community members can benefit from their programs and the social connections they facilitate. Other sectors such as businesses, local government, community groups and philanthropic associations are key enablers as well as the clubs themselves.

There is a recognition that social cohesion could be more explicitly integrated into the missions and operations of sports clubs and organisations. This suggests that while sports naturally bring people together, there is potential for a more proactive approach to fostering social cohesion through sporting activities. Sporting clubs are attentive to the importance of setting a welcoming tone to foster inclusion and the role of leadership in creating such environments. Experiences shared highlighted that whether clubs or associations are perceived as safe spaces is often communicated through tacit knowledge shared through word of mouth of families and community members. Similarly, clubs and associations come to be known through additional aspects of their culture, such as the positive experience people feel in welcoming sporting clubs.

Aspects of sports culture and protocols, such as the role of uniforms in making people feel part of a club, and the importance of sponsorships and partnerships in providing affordable equipment, were discussed. This was seen as an opportunity for cross-sector linkages with community organisations, government and the private sector.

Examples highlighted the importance of safe and inclusive spaces, such as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) swim programs and women-only sessions. However, delivering these programs can involve challenges related to scheduling and balancing differing views about gender-segregated sessions.

Initiatives and programs focusing on equitable access and committee representation for women and sponsorships of teams, were examples shared that aim to address these issues of participation through equity and accessibility in the South-East and beyond.

### Spotlight

- Play Well recognises that everyone has a place in sport and aims to create safe, welcoming, inclusive, and enjoyable sporting environments.
- Health Sporting Clubs, a free initiative run by Monash Health supporting sports clubs and associations role in creating healthier, family-friendly cultures, clubs and associations towards community wellbeing in the South-East.
- Safely engaging with water - Launches at Cardinia Life! - Cardinia Leisure this program is specifically targeted at CALD community members who do not feel confident or safe in and around water, building confidence and connections.

### Schools, colleges and universities

**Education** in both schools and community settings was seen as important for learning to live well together. Positively, there was acknowledgment that school communities in the South-East are very welcoming, where voices are heard and respect is practiced.

The ways that schools can grow civic knowledge, an understanding of First Nations and multicultural history and foster critical thinking were discussed. There is acknowledgment that school communities are very welcoming, where voices are heard and respect is practiced. Schools are increasingly sites where anti-racism frameworks, and policies that support inclusion are taught and enacted.

Schools, in particular, can more effectively cultivate the critical thinking and civic engagement needed to navigate complex local issues—such as the local effects of global conflicts and the multifac-

eted social challenges facing students, families and communities. Building the knowledge and skills of staff and students to hold difficult conversations and enable intercultural exchange is essential for fostering respectful, constructive relationships across diverse groups.

Learning in schools extends well beyond the acquisition of academic knowledge: it develops critical thinking and creates deliberate opportunities to engage with perspectives that differ from one's own, challenging fixed assumptions and broadening horizons. When participants spoke about education's role in promoting social cohesion, they referred not only to classroom learning but also to integrating cultural, civic and ethical education for newcomers and embedding learning opportunities across community settings to build mutual understanding. They also highlighted education's vital role in countering misinformation by strengthening media literacy and critical thinking, so public discussion remains informed and respectful.

Students themselves are constantly negotiating different parts of their identities between their lives at home, school and socially, and there is often contrast around the expectations in each of these realms. Participants recognised how important schools are for students holistically and how detrimental disengagement from school systems can be for young people.

Representation of diverse cultures in curriculum content, inclusive classroom practices and equitable access to educational resources are all essential elements that either strengthen or erode young people's sense of belonging. One school leader noted the importance in increasing staff diversity that reflects the community and means that students see themselves in their teachers.

### School as Connector

Schools in the South-East already foster strong connections for students and families accessing services. Schools (primary and secondary) in the South-East have strong cross-sectoral programmes to strengthen the local social fabric. We heard that schools in the South-East are increasingly becoming connectors, bringing together services and strengthening community connections. We heard how in the South-East:

***“Schools can become a kind of one stop shop with services (such as Foundation House, police, doctors in school programs, Centrelink, etc) coming to the schools, available to those families who have access barriers. Increasing agencies coming on regular visits and programs in school would contribute to social cohesion in our school communities and beyond, because it would just remove a lot of those barriers as well...”***

There was a strong sentiment that there is great benefit in bringing as many of the in-need agencies into the school, growing points of connection, and then they're more likely to connect outside the school as well. However, some of the exemplar programs that currently provide joined-up offerings are reliant on funding that comes from a variety of sources and is not consistent across all schools in the area.

Schools serving as connectors/hubs also support those facing language barriers and challenges, by providing interpreting and translation services (albeit in a typically limited capacity). Communication challenges often arise in relation to complex systems like government and school policy rollouts, even those intended to support students and families

such as online enrolments, government bonus funding etc.

Some female parents who valued the school-based community hubs, saw opportunities to help increase understanding about different practices. For example, there is a suggestion to explain terms (such as 'halal') by including them on school menus. This approach could decrease harmful assumptions and create a healthier environment where students feel free to ask questions about different practices across cultures and religions.

Practical considerations for fostering inclusion were mentioned, such as providing translated materials in more languages and offering interpreter services for form-filling and other administrative tasks. This ensures that language barriers do not impede full participation in educational settings. Some other parental concerns surfaced when discussing schools, highlighting the need for balanced and purposeful use of technology in education settings. For example, suggestions to restrict the use of school-provided laptops and iPads to prevent excessive gaming and ensure focus on schoolwork.

As communities have grown in the South-East who observe religious observations, some people question why schools have not yet included Islamic holy days as public school holidays, or noted holidays where families are understood to keep students at home to observe cultural traditions. There was a specific mention of Muslim students' ability to be home to celebrate Eid-ul-Azha and Eid-al-Fitr. This recognition of diverse religious observances can contribute significantly to students and their parents feeling respected and included.

The issue of truancy was raised by parents as being more than the responsibility of parents or the school alone, suggesting that addressing this problem as a

community requires a collective approach. However, the emphasis on accountability and reporting raises questions about the most effective and supportive ways to address this issue.

### Spotlight

- Ucan2 , a partnership between CMY and Foundation House, with DHA funding, strengthens social cohesion by supporting young people (16–25) who are newly arrived from a refugee or migrant background through volunteer-led group activities that build trust, belonging, cross-cultural connections and pathways to education and community participation.

## Media and digital literacy

Media, particularly in its evolving digital forms, plays a crucial and complex role in shaping social cohesion. Its influence is felt in families and homes, extends to facilitating community connections to shaping public narratives and responses to local and global events. Social media has transformed community connections, enabling rapid, wide-ranging engagement while also amplifying misinformation, echo chambers and social fragmentation. Participants urged mainstream and multilingual media to actively counter division and hate, and highlighted that managing online harms requires distinct, tailored responses different from those used in homes, workplaces, streets or sports arenas.

Feedback indicated that trust in media institutions is pretty low. Examples of media misrepresentation shared by participants highlighted how media actions can erode trust, particularly among targeted

communities. It was also noted that few positive stories make it to the media. This underscores the importance of accurate representation and accountability in media. There was a sense of uneasiness on how best to address this critically important sector and make the media and digital literacy approaches focus on supporting the greater community cohesion and connectivity.

### Spotlight

- Disinformation in the City | MAV website – Enhancing local government response to mis and disinformation
- Scanlon Foundation Research Institute – Narrative 12 – Strong communities don't just happen – Springvale's story

## Government (all levels)

Growing social cohesion requires active support from all levels of government, with local councils often playing a pivotal convening and enabling role.

**Local Government** sits closest to everyday community life and can connect people, groups and institutions in practical ways that make them of emphasis to participants. Local Councils are seen as uniquely placed to convene diverse parties, broker relationships between community groups and institutions, and sustain long-term investment in places and programmes that foster belonging. This combination of proximity and persistence enables councils to support incremental trust-building that state and national policies alone cannot deliver. Local government areas (such as the three LGAs in the South-East) can work together to strategically plan and shape social cohesion initiatives across the region.

**Key Takeaway: Local Government -  
convenor, enabler, sustained investor**

- Local government as convenor, enabler and investor can catalyse important aspects of building, bridging and linking elements of social cohesion, but success depends on a broader commitment to power-sharing and inclusive participation across all levels of government and society.
- Local governments are seen to be uniquely placed to convene connections, enable linkages between and across sectors and best placed to provide support.
- Convene diverse stakeholders, utilising many touchpoints within council, capacity to coordinate local responses.
- Deliver place-based services that are accessible and close to people.
- Local government areas (such as the three LGAs in the South-East) can work together to strategically plan and shape social cohesion initiatives.
- Foster belonging (across networks), safety and trust through inclusive practice and transparency.

A core municipal function that could be enhanced is the convening and facilitating of meaningful dialogue and sharing of experiences across the community. Regular cross-community fora and the use of civic spaces such as Harmony Square for intercultural conversations create visible routines of encounter and exchange. Promoting interculturalism — emphasising mutual contribution and everyday exchange

rather than mere coexistence — shifts the focus to active engagement, non-reactive or crisis-driven, making inclusion a lived dimension of public life.

Transparency and accountability are essential to build confidence in local decision-making and to optimise civic engagement. Greater openness in budget allocations and reporting strengthens legitimacy and reduces rumours or perceptions that some communities are being overlooked.

Councils already have many of the mechanisms in place that show how community input informs policy and action plans, though this remains a strong perception of need from community members<sup>2</sup>.

At a workshop, a table discussion focused on a council initiative that seemed much like the *Connections that Matter* workshops, sharing ideas about strengthening community cohesion and bringing together a cross-section of the community to deliberate and generate ideas for council. One person who, now retired and undergoing health issues, had participated in both that workshop and this one was deeply cynical about the value of another workshop where ideas are shared but ‘nothing comes of it’ while another young student who also participated in both, believed that though there was no feedback on what came of the workshop, something may have come of it.

<sup>2</sup> Recent research highlights the challenges of harassment and disinformation also faced by public servants and elected representatives such as personal threats and abuse, especially when engaging with highly polarised areas including migration, gender and climate action. Responses such as self-censoring and withdrawal can weaken conditions that support democratic debate and effective policymaking. See: Trijsburg, I. & Costello, P., 2025 Information Manipulation and Harassment of Local Leaders: Impacts and Implications. Australian Resilient Democracy Network Discussion Paper 16, Australian National University.



By chance a council staffer heard the discussion and enthusiastically shared that the idea for the upcoming Dandenong Employment Hub, a council-led major economic hub initiative that came out of the Gamechanger workshop. It showed the value of community deliberations in shaping outcomes but also highlights the work needed to ensure communication about consultations and input are shared back with community.

### Inter-governmental alignment

There was recognition that **local and state government** have healthy existing networks and mechanisms for sharing ideas between providers, where service providers in the South-East get together several times a year in person and online to share information, to share experiences, (for example, what's working, what's not working) and also as a training opportunity. Local government areas (such as the three LGAs in the South-East) can work together to strategically plan and shape social cohesion initiatives.

Some areas of need that apply across government, includes improving cultural competency towards enhanced effectiveness and trust. Ongoing professional education for staff, together with training that recognises intra-community differences and local histories, was suggested to encourage deeper sensitivity and trauma-informed approaches to complex needs and issues that shape encounters with government and institutions.

All levels of government were recognised as needing to look to grant-making and funding approaches to enhance opportunity for connections and inclusion of social cohesion goals.

***“For example, it was noted that within the Commonwealth’s Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) Program there is an emphasis on cooperation and linking programs and services within the grant guidelines and that is really promoted. And I think within that community of SETS providers, I think there is a very strong commitment, particularly, particularly in the South-East, to collaboration between the service providers.”***

Applying conflict-sensitivity and Do No Harm principles in creating and promoting grants, while designing inclusive application processes that acknowledge diverse community structures, can reduce bureaucratic barriers and allow grassroots groups to access sustained support. Such reforms also mitigate intra-community tensions that can arise when funding is perceived as unevenly distributed.

Coming back to some of the needs participants mentioned underpinned social cohesion, approaches to addressing systemic pressures requires long-term planning and cross-sectoral commitment. For example, a coherent vision for social housing and responses to the accommodation crisis, alongside policies to manage cost-of-living pressures, are things that people identify as reducing the structural insecurities that undermine cohesion. We heard how practical accessibility measures matter as much as high-level policy. Investing in council buses for inter-cultural events, ensuring increased and resourced interpreter availability in government services, and providing follow-up contacts in people’s preferred languages are straightforward steps that increase participation. These measures show communities that services are proximal to their daily lives. Given the strengths that exist in the system already, there



may be considerations for supporting the visibility and accessibility of these further.

Governments (all tiers) are seen to have the power of engaging influential stakeholders — from services to employers — necessary to design systemic solutions that do not shift burdens onto already stretched community groups. Councils are uniquely placed to convene and sustain local effort, while state and federal governments enable scale, funding stability and systemic alignment.

This Intercultural Dialogue and Social Cohesion Initiative was an intergovernmental collaboration that demonstrated a unique opportunity to connect across all three tiers of government. It was seen as an example of how the Federal Government (in this case, through the Department of Home Affairs), can bring state and local governments together, along with important state institutions (DHHS, MAV and VMC), to reflect a shared commitment to strengthening social cohesion and the importance of coordinated approaches.

The workshops offered a distinctive opportunity for participants to meet in person with an independent facilitator and representatives from different tiers of government, and the intergovernmental design of the initiative signaled its wider significance. Participants were always aware of who was present, and the sessions were intentionally structured to prioritise listening to diverse perspectives, by seating people together at tables and creating space for everyone to share reflections and take part.

### Lessons Learnt

These lessons reflect participants' lived realities in the South-East and identify practical, place-based priorities for strengthening social cohesion.

1. Civic education must be practical and local: teaching rights, responsibilities and how government works is most effective when rooted in schools, community hubs and workplaces and linked to local pathways for influence and service access.
2. Inclusion requires deliberate invitations to long-established residents: cohesion conversations should engage people who identify as “mainstream” so responsibility is shared rather than placed solely on newcomers or specific cultural groups.
3. Do not make cohesion the burden of those most affected by exclusion: initiatives framed only for newly arrived or marginalised groups risk reinforcing inequity; cohesion must be supported across the whole community.
4. Strengthen and replicate effective place-based models: school hubs, community centres and trusted local programmes enable participation for carers, provide child-friendly learning and anchor other services close to the community.
5. Transport and basic independence skills are essential enablers for newly arrived residents, especially women: driving lessons, affordable public transport and locally accessible services reduce isolation for people living outside town centres.
6. Language access is fundamental: routinely funded English programmes, interpreters and translated materials are prerequisites for equitable access to health, legal, education and employment services.

7. Community organisations are first points of contact: local associations, faith and interfaith networks translate services into culturally proximate forms, mediate trust and reach newly arrived people earlier and more effectively than many formal programmes.
8. Leadership pipelines must reflect lived experience: investing in youth leadership, mentoring and emerging community leaders widens the decision-making pool so local leadership mirrors regional diversity.
9. Strengthen local government convening, transparency and participatory practice: councils can model open decision-making, connect sectors and communities, and help institutionalise intercultural engagement across service systems.
10. Arts, sport and informal activities build bridges: low-barrier, recurring programmes such as walking groups, sports clubs and storytelling create repeated, safe and informal interactions that build trust more effectively than one-off consultations; place-based events, markets and public-space activities extend these opportunities.
11. Media representation shapes trust: accurate, strength-based storytelling, multilingual outlets and attention to online platforms are needed to prevent misrepresentation, counter division and rebuild public confidence.
12. Conflict-sensitive engagement is essential: skilled facilitation, restorative practices and accessible problem-solving

mechanisms are required because cohesion work will surface tensions that, if addressed fairly and transparently, can be transformed into opportunities to strengthen relationships and tackle structural barriers.

13. Grant and funding designs should enable linking, not siloing: participatory, cross-group and multi-year funding better supports relationship building than short, narrowly targeted grants.
14. Employers, trainers and schools play a key role in work pathways; aligning these actors with local employment hubs and programmes strengthens young people's social and economic participation.
15. Cultural competence and local histories matter: ongoing professional development for frontline staff should recognise intra-community differences, local histories and trauma-informed practice to build institutional trust.
16. Feedback and visible follow-through sustain engagement: people expect to see how their input has informed decisions; transparent feedback loops reinforce participation and trust.

These lessons point to clear, practical levers — place-based services, routine language access, inclusive civic learning, accurate narratives and sustained community connections — that together strengthen belonging. For policy audiences, the findings indicate where coordinated policy, shared accountability and longer-term resourcing can best support durable, place-based social cohesion in the South-East of Melbourne.

## Conclusion

Community members in the South-East value feeling respected, safe, connected and able to participate. Rights, everyday democratic practice and the ability to belong were repeatedly named as anchors for identity and belonging. Social cohesion in practice appears as everyday relationships of trust, shared values and mutual support, together with institutional fairness and accessible services. These strengths coexist with clear pressures: experiences of racism and other forms of discrimination, language and service barriers for newly arrived people, gaps in affordable housing and living costs, and polarising forces online and in the media that can amplify division.

Workshop participants described social cohesion as multi-layered. At the personal and family level, belonging and intergenerational relationships shape how people participate. Community organisations, hubs, schools, faith groups, sport clubs and third spaces such as markets and libraries were shown to be vital places for connection, information and practical support. Workplaces, businesses and service providers were identified as important for creating access to employment and resources. Local government was widely seen as uniquely placed to convene, enable linkages and sustain place-based investment, while state and federal agencies were important for policy, funding and systemic change.

The lessons learnt reflect lived realities in the South-East: social cohesion grows from everyday, local interactions, practical enablers and shared responsibility. To strengthen social cohesion, the workshops point to the need for a mixed approach that combines immediate, locally led actions with longer-term system changes. Short-term steps might include convening restorative dialogues and looking for greater inter-cultural engagements, improving interpreter and translation access, and utilising the rich arenas of arts, cultural and sporting programs.

Ongoing attention is needed to further strengthen joined-up, close to the community service pathways, and broaden civic and intercultural education, and sustain council convening roles as an enabler and investor in social cohesion. These actions should be developed through inclusive processes that recognise local histories, are people-centred and actively involve the long-established and newest community members, so responsibility for cohesion is shared.

The workshops affirmed the manifold ways that social cohesion in the South-East is strong and can grow through everyday relationships, accessible institutions, inclusive practices and deliberate cross-sector action. Strengthening cohesion requires both practical local investments and attention to structural drivers of exclusion, with councils, community organisations, businesses, schools, faith groups and all levels of government working together to protect and grow the connections that matter.

## **Appendix 1: List of Connections that Matter Workshops (Nov 2025 – Feb 2026)**

| 1  | Students and mature-aged residents         | 27 November 2025 | Keysborough Learning Centre         |
|----|--------------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 2  | Community sector                           | 28 November 2025 | Keysborough Community Hub           |
| 3  | Community sector                           | 29 November 2025 | Dandenong Civic Centre              |
| 4  | Women                                      | 1 December 2025  | Barton Primary School Community Hub |
| 5  | Community sector                           | 2 December 2025  | Springvale Community Hub            |
| 6  | Interfaith Network                         | 8 December 2025  | Community Centre Dandenong          |
| 7  | Community sector                           | 9 December 2025  | Springvale Community Hub            |
| 8  | Multicultural Community Engagement Network | 9 December 2025  | Online                              |
| 9  | Parents and families                       | 12 December 2025 | Springvale Rise Primary School      |
| 10 | Young People                               | 17 December 2025 | Uniting Office                      |
| 11 | Community sector                           | 22 December 2025 | Bunjil Place                        |
| 12 | Sports and Recreation sector               | 22 December 2025 | Online                              |
| 13 | Service Providers                          | 22 December 2025 | AMES Australia                      |
| 14 | Workplace and businesses                   | 28 December 2025 | Dandenong Civic Centre              |
| 15 | Health sector                              | 29 December 2025 | Monash Health                       |
| 16 | Education sector                           | 5 February 2026  | Online                              |

## Appendix 2: Community Cohesion Hubs and Activities in Greater Dandenong Libraries (Current and Upcoming)

|                                                            |                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Keysborough Library                                        | BITE into the Library! – Belong. Interact. Try. Explore | A multi-part initiative targeting community members who are unfamiliar with the library, through engaging, bite-sized experiences. The program includes a monthly Toddler time series co-hosted with Victoria Police, the Country Fire Association, First Nations storytellers and Safe Cat Safe Wildlife, a two hour Cool Kids First Aid school holiday program and a learning, creative and social engagement series specifically designed for seniors. By partnering with trusted local organisations the program builds a bridge between the library and key community services, fostering trust, familiarity, and a sense of belonging.                                                                 |
| Springvale Library                                         | Talking Faith? Women, Faith and Service: Leading with   | An event featuring a panel of 6–8 women from diverse faith backgrounds sharing their experiences in leadership and service. The event promotes understanding and inclusion across cultures and religions, particularly in the context of current social tensions and rising community division. Planning involved over 10 months of community engagement. As part of the program a video of community stories has been created and will be shared at the event and posted to YouTube so that it can be shared with the wider faith communities and stakeholders beyond the event itself.                                                                                                                     |
| Dandenong Library, Keysborough Library, Springvale Library | Creative Seniors                                        | 4 x senior-focused art workshops, including Sri Lankan tea and paint, portrait drawing, polymer clay, arabesque embroidery. This program is scheduled for a time when community attention is often centered on children and families due to the school holidays, leaving older adults, especially those without close family connections, feeling overlooked. By offering inclusive programs such as these, the library ensures seniors have meaningful opportunities to connect and feel valued.                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Dandenong Library                                          | Conversation Circle                                     | Weekly conversation group that supports migrant and refugee-background patrons—particularly those with limited English—by offering more opportunities to practice conversational English in a safe, social setting. The program also attracts native English speakers who attend for the social connection and community spirit, creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for all. Partnered sessions with other council departments and external organisations will introduce relevant and current topics—such as sustainability, State Emergency Service/natural disaster preparation, and first aid—enriching the learning experience and connecting participants with broader community resources. |
| Dandenong Library                                          | Multicultural March Celebrations                        | 7 x events including cultural performances, workshops, and community engagement activities that highlight the rich diversity of the Local Government Area. These events celebrate language, heritage, and identity, and they foster a sense of belonging and pride. The events also build relationships between the library and multicultural communities, encourage intercultural exchange and promote cultural preservation.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |



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