

# Strengthening Seniors Inclusion and Participation (SSIP) in Local Communities

Evaluation Report

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## Section 1: Background

The Strengthening Seniors Inclusion and Participation in local communities (SSIP) initiative was commissioned as a place-based program response to the 2016 report by the Commissioner for Senior Victorians: *Ageing is everyone's business – a report on isolation and loneliness among senior Victorians*<sup>1</sup>, which identified social isolation and loneliness as an emerging public health and wellbeing policy issue.

*Ageing is everyone's business* defined loneliness as “the subjective, unwelcome feeling of a lack or loss of companionship or emotional attachment with other people”, and social isolation as “an objective state of having minimal contact and interaction with others and a generally low level of involvement in community life”. While there is limited consensus about the best ways to prevent, or respond to social isolation and loneliness, and a lack of clarity as to who is responsible for dealing with it, there is a high level of government, community and stakeholder interest in this issue.

In ageing societies across the world, enhancing social inclusion and participation is a health promotion and prevention theme of escalating importance. The World Health Organization's *Age-friendly Cities framework*<sup>2</sup> highlights social inclusion and participation as a key enabler to longevity. The value of “social prescribing” - whereby GPs referring patients into social activities to encourage investment in friendships and social activities to enhance wellbeing and longevity<sup>3</sup> - has been profiled in British media<sup>4</sup>. The Campaign to End Loneliness<sup>5</sup> is a recent UK government initiative addressing loneliness in partnership with community and civil society as a key health determinant. The campaign includes the appointment of a Minister for Loneliness.

The recent *Aging in the shadows* report provides an update on social isolation among older adults in New York City. The report identifies the impacts of social isolation on older people and outlines the importance of meaningful social participation as being an essential element of preventing isolation.

In Victoria, related work through the *Age-Friendly Victoria* initiative includes the signing of the *Age-Friendly Declaration* by the Victorian Government, local government and other organisations including businesses, peak bodies and community agencies to raise the profile of the need to better plan for the impact of ageing populations and related issues of healthy and active ageing.

Based on Australian and international research, *Ageing is everyone's business* estimated that 10 per cent of Victorian seniors experienced significant detrimental impacts from isolation and loneliness, and identified that older people felt socially connected primarily in the area in which they live. While there are many ways and means to maintain connections with friends and family, local community participation appears to be important.

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<sup>1</sup> Ageing is everyone's business can be downloaded from: [www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/services-information/commissioner-for-senior-victorians](http://www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/services-information/commissioner-for-senior-victorians)

<sup>2</sup> WHO Age Friendly Cities:

[http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/43755/9789241547307\\_eng.pdf;jsessionid=D19A1D19F9EFE5A15E4E51C1B66C52EE?sequence=1](http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/43755/9789241547307_eng.pdf;jsessionid=D19A1D19F9EFE5A15E4E51C1B66C52EE?sequence=1) Part 8 page 38 on social inclusion of older people in cities.

<sup>3</sup> [www.healthylondon.org/resource/social-prescribing/](http://www.healthylondon.org/resource/social-prescribing/)

<sup>4</sup> [www.theguardian.com/society/2013/nov/05/social-prescribing-fishing-group-doctor-ordered](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/nov/05/social-prescribing-fishing-group-doctor-ordered)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-42708507>

<sup>7</sup> United Neighbourhood Houses: *Ageing in the Shadows – An update on Social Isolation Among Older Adults in New York* September 2017

## Section 2: Placed based projects

This section describes the projects funded in the seven municipalities and outlines the outcomes and lessons learnt.

### Age-friendly organisations

Latrobe City Council sought to reduce isolation and loneliness of older members of the community by developing a network of 'Welcoming & Age Friendly' community groups with a recognisable brand, and through individual referral pathways.

This project:

- held a workshop to define what being welcoming and age friendly meant to individuals and then created resources to support groups to develop and maintain an inclusive environment
- established a network of groups and clubs to support people to re-engage with their community
- provided a broader understanding of the health impacts of social isolation and loneliness
- developed an identifiable brand with localised recognition
- developed promotional tools with older people, including a library campaign in an accessible, comfortable environment
- raised awareness of available community involvement opportunities.

Key lessons included that:

- face-to-face contact motivates groups, increases understanding of the benefits of the project and ensures future interaction
- no two groups are the same – each group offers something more than just their scheduled activities
- each individual referral is effective because it is based on the person's interests and capabilities
- most community groups could relate to the benefits of the project, and had engaged with socially isolated seniors
- the majority of community members, even if they are currently disconnected, believe that community involvement is important
- clubs and groups respond very well to peer evaluation
- developing a network of welcoming and age-friendly groups can establish promotional avenues.

Members of the Morwell Historical Society reflected on the benefits of the Age-friendly proposition common to many clubs: *"We're always looking for new members. The Forum offered benefits to the club: Improve our status, fees and funds, wealth of knowledge. Make sure there is enough information on reducing isolation ("I twigged") "How might new members assist in the administration at the club, roles people could take e.g. sweep the floor; make a slice?"*

# Case Study

## Welcoming and Age Friendly Clubs: Latrobe City Council

### **The Intervention**

The Latrobe City Council project developed and awarded clubs with a "Welcoming and Age Friendly" brand. The aim was to support individuals to engage in the community in a safe and inclusive environment, using a peer-audited self-assessment process to ensure clubs and activities are welcoming and age-friendly.

### **Context and Nature of SSIP Partnership**

The Project Leadership Group supported by a part-time Project Officer engaged key local clubs and several individual community members to advise and champion the project.

### **Rationale for Intervention**

With many clubs and activities available in the region, the view was taken that individuals might not be aware of local activities, but that once informed of opportunities, if they did attempt to participate they may not experience an inclusive welcome by well-established groups.

### **Summary of Intervention, including aims**

The intention was for individuals to have greater knowledge of activities and for those supported to get involved to feel less isolated. New individuals would be identified and connected to groups and activities. For the participating groups, the aim was for greater vibrancy and growth in membership.

### **Steps involved in designing Intervention**

The process used the principles of co-design. Consultation with groups was steered by a local Project Leadership Group and included a discussion on what "Welcoming & Age Friendly" means to individuals, as well as a broader understanding of the health impacts of social isolation and loneliness on individuals in the community.

Resources were developed to support groups to develop and maintain an inclusive environment through self-auditing of their group or club, and to work with peer organisations to cross-check the accessibility of another group.

### **Steps involved with implementing the Intervention**

The project ran training with 54 well-established groups, and 24 groups participated in the first round of self-assessments.

A network of groups and clubs was developed, to support individuals to re-engage. Collaborative practice between groups and understanding/sharing of best practice was a priority.

A brand and promotional tools were developed to enhance localised recognition and enthusiasm to participate. The Mayor awarded the first round of clubs who had met the accreditation requirement at a ceremony, and this positive recognition was accompanied by other rewards for buy-in, such as links to grant applications associated with the "Welcoming & Age Friendly" accreditation.

### **Key outcomes from interventions (for seniors/community)**

Promotion of the project raised awareness of what community involvement opportunities are available and provided an opportunity for isolated people to re-connect with community activities.

A local community member with significant health issues was referred to the project and is now in regular contact. Diane said, *"getting older means when I walk along the street, I smile at people and nothing comes back. Having Christy ring me was very meaningful. I am noticed – I am still here."*

After getting involved, she was thinking of setting up a “cuppa” group to meet in a local café to engage people living locally who were also very isolated and living on low incomes with poor health.

### **Key Learnings re Design and Implementation**

Benefits of individualising contact with face to face - Groups are more motivated and can understand the benefits of the project through personalised interaction.

No two groups are the same – each group offers something different on top of the ‘activities’ that they offer.

Each individual referral is effective, as they are personalised based their interests and what they currently capable of mentally, physically and financially.

Most community groups can relate to the benefits of the project, often having at least one member of the group who can testify to having experienced loneliness and or isolation prior to joining the group.

Community members recognise that community involvement is important even if they are currently disconnected

Clubs/groups respond very well to being evaluated by a peer

### **Post SSIP impacts (sustainability)**

The success of the project led into new Council processes so that all aged care assessments from 1 July 2018 include an option for referral to the W&AF contact point within Council, who refers participants out to W&AF clubs, who in turn gain ongoing promotion and support by Council.

### **Tools and Resources**

- Educational material on social isolation and loneliness targeted at community groups
- Materials to assist groups to self-assess their accessibility and welcome
- Peer audit process for one group to audit another
- The welcoming and age-friendly brand and promotional material for libraries, community groups and media outlets



## Local community connectors

The Community Connector Project in the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region trained volunteers to deliver one-on-one support to alleviate barriers to accessing social activities. Via a relaxed phone conversation or face to face, Community Connector volunteers would identify the activities community members would like to be involved in and provide them with information on how to access those activities. Volunteers could also accompany community members to an activity or group to help them settle in.

A focus on building capacity in existing clubs and groups to provide a welcoming and friendly environment for new members helped to retain and increase membership. It also meant that Community Connectors could refer people to activities, and be confident that they would be warmly welcomed.

Through this project the group:

- developed a high-quality social inclusion volunteer Community Connector training package
- recruited a project leadership group from 12 key community agencies across Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula
- held two large community consultations to determine the project scope, attended by 90 people
- delivered the Community Connector training package to community members
- recruited 17 Community Connector volunteers across the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region, and provided ongoing support and training for volunteers
- raised awareness of the importance of social inclusion for health. This occurred at community and agency levels
- increased partnerships within communities
- developed a resource kit to enable seniors clubs and groups to implement welcoming policies and procedures
- committed to providing ongoing support and training for volunteer committees of management to help them develop their club or group
- strengthened relationships between the clubs and groups and council, and also strengthened the relationship between the two partnering councils
- brought together representatives of 58 clubs from across the region to attend a Seniors Clubs and Group Forum in November 2017 to network and discuss what it means to be a welcoming club
- developed a publication for clubs and groups about how to develop and maintain a welcoming culture
- increased relationships between local government and local seniors clubs and groups resulting in ongoing support and training programs being offered to committees of management.

The Whittlesea Seniors Linkup project established a network of volunteer Community Connectors who support socially isolated and lonely seniors to participate in activities that meet their needs and interests. The project also promoted and encouraged age-friendly approaches for community groups.

Commencing with a mapping exercise of activities for seniors in the municipality, the project built a searchable online database of activities and information.

This project involved:

- an information workshop and two training sessions for Community Connectors
- regular networking opportunities for connectors and a facility and activity tour to familiarise volunteers with available activities
- developing a volunteer Community Connectors training package, including a contact report and referral pathway information
- supporting, via the work of the Community Connectors, more than 18 people to link to a range of activities including golf, Tai Chi, a walking group, a seniors club and walking football.
- A major outcome of this project was bringing to light the many areas that can be improved. An important lesson was that simple actions like creating brochures, checking in with people who have stopped attending, and improving communication can make a big difference.





## Case Study

### **“Community Connector” network development: Mornington-Frankston and Whittlesea**

#### **Nature of Intervention**

Building a network of voluntary “community connectors” to connect socially isolated people with groups and activities in their locality in a way that suits the volunteer connector and the isolated person.

#### **Context and Nature of SSIP Partnership**

Led by local government positive ageing staff with Project Leadership Groups including local community organisation leaders.

#### **Rationale for Intervention**

The “Community Connector” project in Frankston/Mornington Peninsula and the “Seniors Link-Up” in Whittlesea both started with the assumption that there are many activities available in a locality but that isolated people may feel disconnected, experience a range of barriers, and need some additional support to get involved in what may then become a regular program of involvement and participation.

#### **Summary of Intervention, including aims**

The aim was to inspire and sustain connections with existing programs and activities by isolated residents, using community volunteers, brokered by local Council staff.

#### **Steps involved in designing Intervention**

The key ingredient was the engagement of a vibrant location-based project leadership group, hosted by local government, with a diversity of community volunteers, active clubs and groups (e.g. Seniors’ Clubs, U3A, Probus, Lions, sport and recreation groups); and service providers (including neighbourhood houses, libraries, aged services and volunteering organisations) represented on the group. The leadership groups required several meetings to brainstorm ideas, followed by time to implement, then to review the program, over the 12 month period.

#### **Steps involved with implementing the Intervention**

- Production of awareness raising material and training sessions for local community members interested in responding to social isolation and loneliness. Training topics included barriers to social inclusion, correlations between isolation and gambling, providing volunteers with resource kits, information on the effects of isolation on health;
- Policies and role expectations for “community connectors” once recruited and inducted (whether as a volunteer in their “home” club or as part of a “non-aligned” network supported by the project);
- A referral process (tested in some detail to ensure sensitivity to the individual and fair expectations on the Connector) and clear sources of referrals, including council newsletters, walk-ins, internet, promotions at the library and word of mouth;
- Targeted education and awareness for clubs and groups about the importance of being welcoming, for clubs and groups – which in some cases generated specific MOU type arrangements for volunteers that accompany new members (e.g. Plenty Valley Arts Centre now offers a free entry card comparable to a companion card to Seniors Link-Up volunteers to facilitate their accompaniment of isolated community members);
- Active facilitation by the project lead to address any issues and re-negotiate the welcome for new members when there were any difficulties.

### **Key outcomes from interventions (for seniors/community)**

In Whittlesea, over just a 3-month period, senior community members were referred and connected into programs from Oct 2017 to Jan 2018 including golf, walking football, seniors' clubs, tai-chi exercise, walking group, water aerobics, gentle exercise, LEAP trip, Morning Melody show, Twilight Program and Golf Trip.

In Frankston and Mornington Peninsula, senior community members trained as Community Connectors, gaining increased knowledge on social inclusion and social isolation, privacy, confidentiality and boundaries, barriers to social inclusion and building relationships. Community Connectors engaged an average of 3 people each and referred them to social activities, including physical accompaniment and or encouragement.

Connectors valued being well resourced with information on the issue of social isolation and loneliness and on current programs. *"I saw a huge difference in a 64 year old man who I connected to a volunteer position. I saw a difference in how he dressed and talked and he said to me that I had no idea what I had done for him and the role has saved his life"*

### **Key Learnings on Design and Implementation**

The organisation's expectations on busy volunteers can be managed with the offer of time limited "assignments" and regular information on events and opportunities in an area of interest to the volunteer. A clear, ongoing, well known point of contact was essential for volunteer retention.

There was an initial intention to enable home visits by Connector volunteers to meet the isolated person. However, after testing options, the City of Whittlesea Positive Ageing staff contacted the community member. In Frankston and Mornington Peninsula, similar work was undertaken to enable a Council contact point for initial interview with individual community members with a follow up where a volunteer would meet them at a café or at the activity.

### **Post SSIP impacts (sustainability)**

Whittlesea Ageing Cluster is continuing to develop partnerships and new program ideas. The referral process will continue.

Participants in the Mornington Peninsula area indicated an increased understanding of the importance of social inclusion for seniors and how this project aims to promote this. Thirty-three out of the 39 evaluations (84%) stated they were inspired to make changes following the discussion and presentation of materials at the forum. U3A Southern Peninsula Tutors are now encouraged to have a class assistant to help with welcoming new members and managing other position requirements.

### **Tools and Resources**

- Frankston and Mornington Peninsula training material for clubs and groups
- Whittlesea - Welcoming letter template, a welcoming club charter, information on appointing a welcoming officer and their role, how to boost club membership and how local government can support clubs.

## Co-designing with older people

Using co-design methodology to strengthen seniors participation at City of Maribyrnong, this project surveyed older people to understand their needs and aspirations for lifestyle and community wellbeing. Socially isolated older people, particularly those who might not use regular programs and services were consulted, to find out what activities they would like to see in their local area.

Working with local community leaders, the project examined gaps in opportunities and barriers to access. The project leadership group then identified five short-term prototypes for delivery during the Victorian Seniors Festival.

This project:

- developed a model for engaging with older people to co-design service activities
- provided opportunities for older people to tell agencies what they would like to see
- increased the civic participation of older people within the City of Maribyrnong
- provided vibrant intergenerational and intercultural activities that older people want to be a part of
- created clear, measurable and sustainable outcomes for older people.

During the consultation and prototype stages of the project, lessons included:

- 78 per cent of participants wanted to feel more connected to people and activities in their community. While more than 80 per cent had lived in the area for 10 or more years, only a small proportion felt strongly or very strongly attached to their community
- transport was a common concern. Leading to consideration of providing a community bus, volunteer driver service, improved access to public transport, or information on parking options
- affordability was a key factor. Therefore undertaking cheaper activities that involve less infrastructure, equipment or paid staff time would be beneficial
- that older people desire contemporary, future-oriented services, opportunities and support programs
- it is important to provide engagement and participation for seniors and involve older people in project design and decision making.

*“As I get older I don’t want to be shut away in senior citizens’ clubs. I want to be valued and active in my community”* (Survey Respondent Maribyrnong).

*“There are many of us out there over 50 who do not work in paid employment anymore and are not interested in PAG groups or bus trips or senior citizens’ groups but want to be involved with people our own age in interesting, fun and informative classes or groups around our own age, and want to laugh and get out of the house and not feel patronised as we are older”* (Survey Respondent Maribyrnong).

*“Too many assumptions that older people need boring activities. Even if they have a health problem, they can still laugh and have a good time. Old age is not a disease”* (Survey Respondent Maribyrnong).

## Building sustainable local partnerships to drive change

enliven is a health promoting charity and primary care partnership. As lead agency, enliven brought together an alliance of local area health and human services to improve care of older people in the community. The project created meaningful partnerships across the agencies, and engaged with older people who were not currently accessing services.

In March 2017, local agencies participated in a workshop to identify ways of trialling engagement and re-engagement activities for seniors. This led to the following initiatives:

- a survey of South Eastern Legacy clients in Greater Dandenong to inform future offerings by that organisation
- a partnership between the Dandenong Neighbourhood House and the City of Greater Dandenong Library (Dandenong branch) to establish a homework club where seniors mentored year 6–12 students and facilitated peer to peer support

- a robotics class for older adults using EV3 LEGO robotics kits who had little or no computer skills to build confidence in using computers (held at the Library as a partnership between Dandenong Library and Dandenong Neighbourhood house)
- a review of technology needs and the development of a digital literacy class, which pioneered an innovative teaching format (run through Dandenong Neighbourhood House).
- Key lessons included:
- primary care partnerships are well connected facilitators to tackle isolation and loneliness in older people
- enliven acted as a conduit between organisations to expand opportunities to engage seniors in activities and initiatives
- bringing different community groups together resulted in meaningful and sustainable partnerships and unexpected outcomes
- engaging seniors to support and mentor youth and their learning (ie. the homework club) invigorated and energised older people
- trialling different approaches to engage and support seniors in technology is crucial. Further research on this approach would be valuable
- the robotics class improved participants' confidence to explore other digital technologies, such as mobile phone and computers.
- common interests bring people together regardless of where they live, even if beyond municipal boundaries.

*"I didn't know how to turn on a computer, I didn't want to use a computer. I started the basic and beyond basic computer courses then started the Robotics course. We didn't get to finish the course because of a room issue but I will be starting it again next term. Working with the computer and robotics is good for the brain!" Mike, 76 years old*

## Making seniors everyone's business

The City of Greater Bendigo and Shire of Loddon project worked with local community groups and organisations to create awareness of the needs of older community members so that these needs could be included in program planning and delivery. It also strengthened local connections and referral pathways by building community capacity and interagency partnerships.

A Wellbeing Team was established in the Bendigo U3A to work with vulnerable U3A members. The team developed a movie morning to bring together people who had trouble accessing the commercial cinema. The Wellbeing Team also tackled nutrition by hosting lunch after the movie morning.

The Bendigo -Loddon project also included library site activation and engagement, and digital literacy programs in Axedale, Inglewood, Elmore and Boort.

Museums Victoria helped to develop reminiscing kits, which the project used to connect seniors with younger members of the community. Author tours and book clubs will be developed in the future.

Training was also developed for clubs, libraries and volunteers to improve understanding of the service system, referral pathways, and accessing My Aged Care. Meanwhile PLG member Sports Focus met with clubs around Bendigo and Loddon and targeted clubs that have an older demographic. Two sporting clubs also participated: Woodbury Bowls Club and Eaglehawk Croquet Club.

Key achievements of this project were:

- training sessions to help groups and volunteers identify the needs of seniors, and refer people to other supports
- Wellbeing Team formed at U3A Bendigo
- use of the reminiscing kit training from Museums Victoria leading to establishment of a working group to plan programs for seniors, including a 'memory café' and outreach reminiscing sessions
- a group of socially isolated seniors were provided transport to enjoy a 'memories of childhood' session, followed by afternoon tea. They loved the reminiscing, sharing of stories and connection with others.

There were different views on how to build a focus on “ageing is everyone’s business.” This was illustrated by a conversation about the nature of language by PLG members in Bendigo-Loddon, where a focus on encouraging welcoming behaviour at a sports club highlighted inclusive behaviour as “everyone’s business” rather than creating a specific “welfare officer” role; whereas a “wellbeing” focus with a dedicated wellbeing team was created within the U3A. Both approaches suited their local context.

### **Reflections from Sports Focus:**

*We started with “active participation” but have now morphed into “keep people engaged” as “it’s not about expecting people to do 100 star jumps”*

*The message is that “Engagement is still a priority even when you no longer play.”*

*“We need to see the barriers – grandparents come to watch their grandchild but when little Johnnie leaves so do they. The nomination process is exclusionary in some clubs and it feels like you need a character reference to get in”.*

*“There is a need to have a conversation – people are suspicious of single or isolated older people. Need to build confidence then see and celebrate the difference.”*

*Sports Focus encourages clubs to be “the best club you can be”. There is interest emerging re “how do we identify trigger points?” If a club wants to get to the next level, they ask how do we keep new people and re-engage people who have dropped off”.*

Goldfield Libraries Corp: *“We appreciated the opportunity to focus on program potentials for the growing elderly population in our community, often unseen, unvoiced and under the radar yet so vulnerable and with great needs. A significant impact was an increase in staff’s awareness of the isolated elderly and potential ways in which we can connect, engage and create a sense of community in our library spaces.”*

## Section 3: The Strengthening Seniors Inclusion and Participation in local communities initiative

The Strengthening Seniors Inclusion and Participation (SSIP) in local communities initiative aimed to contribute to the vision of a more accessible and inclusive community for people as they age by building on the limited existing evidence base about how to best address the challenges of isolation and loneliness for senior Victorians.

### Purpose

Ageing is Everyone's Business identified that the causes and risk factors of isolation and loneliness of older people are complex and often multifaceted. For example, isolation and loneliness may be triggered by life events such as retirement, relocation, illness, loss of a partner or a combination of events. Importantly, there are also protective factors that can limit the risk of becoming isolated in the first place. The aim of SSIP was to better understand social isolation experienced by older people and to develop place-based interventions that would assist with prevention and response, and how these might be developed, sustained and replicated in other settings.

### Funding model

The project funding model was a one off grant (\$80,000) distributed to seven local government areas (\$560,000) to support interventions that would contribute to sustainable change over time. In this sense the measures of success were less about the particular number of older people who participated in each intervention, and much more about testing which interventions demonstrated successful approaches and degrees of sustainability.

Projects were run in seven local government areas, selected on analysis of socio-economic status, proportion of older people in the population and to cover a variety of metro, regional/rural and urban interface locations. The locations were:

- City of Greater Dandenong
- Latrobe City
- City of Whittlesea
- Shire of Mornington Peninsula
- City of Frankston
- City of Greater Bendigo and Shire of Loddon
- City of Maribyrnong.

Local government led most of the SSIP projects and feedback from community partners indicated councils were generally seen to offer a sustainable "honest broker" role trusted by the community. Other community agencies also enjoy high levels of trust and have capacity for cross-sectoral leadership with positive, inclusive vision, as demonstrated by the leadership of the City of Dandenong project by the Primary Care Partnership, enliven.

Furthermore, \$200,000 was allocated over the life of the project for development and dissemination of resources and tools and provision of social planning support and evaluation.

### Focus areas

Four focus areas for effort were identified:

### Service offerings

The report 'Ageing is everyone's business' identified the important role local and community organisations have in providing social participation opportunities. It identified the capacity for organisations to consider how they could strengthen the opportunity for older people to be involved. For example, organisations may identify opportunities to grow attendance levels or membership, review program offerings and seek to enhance participation levels by seniors. In addition, a range of practical opportunities may exist for local and community organisations to offer

services or programs at new locations, re-orient activities to enable people with different levels of mobility to participate, or consider access and inclusion offerings – such as coordinating car pools.

In most locations, service and program offerings were researched, re-designed, reconfigured and refreshed. Examples included the Dandenong Technology for All and robotics classes; Maribyrnong research and co-design of events for the Seniors Festival; and initiatives in libraries in Bendigo-Loddon.

## Organisational Culture

The culture of an organisation is a key factor in maximising participation by senior Victorians. For example, the culture of an organisation or network may feel unwelcoming to an older person who is new to the area or to the organisation. Adoption of “inclusion” measures such as specific processes for welcoming new participants, addressing visual and hearing requirements, offering outreach to new members or delivering more accessible online communications that suit members with limited mobility may assist organisations to improve their membership and relevance to local seniors.

Organisational culture as a barrier and enabler to social participation was analysed and new approaches tested in several projects. Examples included the Whittlesea Seniors Link-Up training and awareness component; Latrobe City’s Welcoming and Age-Friendly clubs education and peer-based accreditation project; and City of Bendigo and Shire of Loddon club training “Curriculum for Change.”

## Local connections and referral pathways

Longstanding community organisations could consider opportunities to build or strengthen connections and referral pathways for new members. Participating organisations would have the opportunity to identify and strengthen mutual referral pathways with other organisations, sharing local community facilities and joining together with other organisations to share offerings across memberships to maintain viability.

Examples of projects focused on strengthening community networks, awareness of “what is out there” and referral pathways between Council and other organisations included the Latrobe City Welcoming and Age-friendly clubs referrals; the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula Community Connectors; Whittlesea forums; and Dandenong networks across different sectors represented within the Project Leadership Groups.

## Community organisation governance

Different organisations are likely to be at varied stages of organisational growth and capacity. For example, given the ageing of the population and changes in the age composition of local communities, some community organisations may be experiencing declining membership or participation levels while others may be going through a growth phase. The project provided the opportunity to refresh governance arrangements, consider succession planning or other engagement processes, and identify and develop governance and other resources to aid organisation capacity in the longer term.

While participating organisations within the project had an opportunity to consider their governance arrangements as well as matters related to their organisational life cycle, it did not emerge as an overt focus of any of the SSIP interventions. However, the pain point of “over-reliance on too few people” was recognised as a factor in relation to existing organisational culture and making clubs more welcoming for new members.

## Outcomes

Based on the four focus areas, the expected outcomes in each location were:

- **Increased social participation by older people**, including isolated older people, in local community activities and programs, including through membership of community organisations, volunteering and participation in events and activities



- **More sustainable community-based organisations** through improved organisational governance, participation in organisation networks, strengthened succession planning and alternative government arrangements, for example auspice models.
- **Strengthened working relationships between community organisations at the local level** focused on improved seniors participation including supported referral pathways.
- **Increased community awareness of the importance of social participation of older people** and how to maintain and support community participation of older people.

## Structure

At each location, **lead agencies** were funded to work in partnership with local community based organisations. Lead agencies played a role as agents of change and networkers in collaboration with their project partners and community. They ensured the priority focus areas were based on reported community need, project timelines were generally met and the expected outcomes could be delivered.

Each Lead Agency established a local **Project Leadership Group (PLG)** whose role was to plan, oversee and champion local project activities. Frankston and Mornington Peninsula chose to establish one PLG across the two locations as their close proximity meant they had common stakeholders and community based partners. In all location, efforts were made to ensure the design of local components was ceded to older people in the community, through inclusion of active older community members in the PLGs, alongside council staff and community partner representatives. Local community partner organisations were those which were well placed to engage residents likely to experience isolation and loneliness as they get older. They included intergenerational organisations such as Neighbourhood Houses and libraries as well as services and groups catering to older age groups – such as Legacy, U3A and local seniors clubs (including ethno specific groups/clubs).

**Project leads** were the managers and project staff responsible within the project lead organisations. As well as engaging partners locally to plan and deliver the work, project leads were required to participate in a state-wide Community of Practice and encourage attendance of local project partners in Community of Practice meetings.

All seven local project lead representatives met via teleconference once a month to share information, ideas and drive ownership of the overall project priority focus areas. These regular meetings aimed to create a unity of purpose and shifts in critical thinking enabling progression of project plans and implementation ideas. The evaluation indicated that this network was essential to the creation of an overall project identity and to help ensure Project Leads were clear on the intent of the project and its priority focus areas.

A **Community of Practice** was managed at state level, with an open invitation to all members of the local Project Leadership Groups and the state-wide Reference Group. The Community of Practice meetings were to share resources and work in progress, share insights as the activities were implemented, inform the design of the communities of practice events and inform the design of a state-wide forum held at the end of the initiative to share learnings with a broader group of stakeholders.

The Community of Practice was highly valued as a source of ideas and connections across the whole program. The meetings provided valued peer support and helped support the transition from project planning to implementation and from implementation to review and setting future directions.

A description of the methodology of the Community of Practice is at Appendix 1.

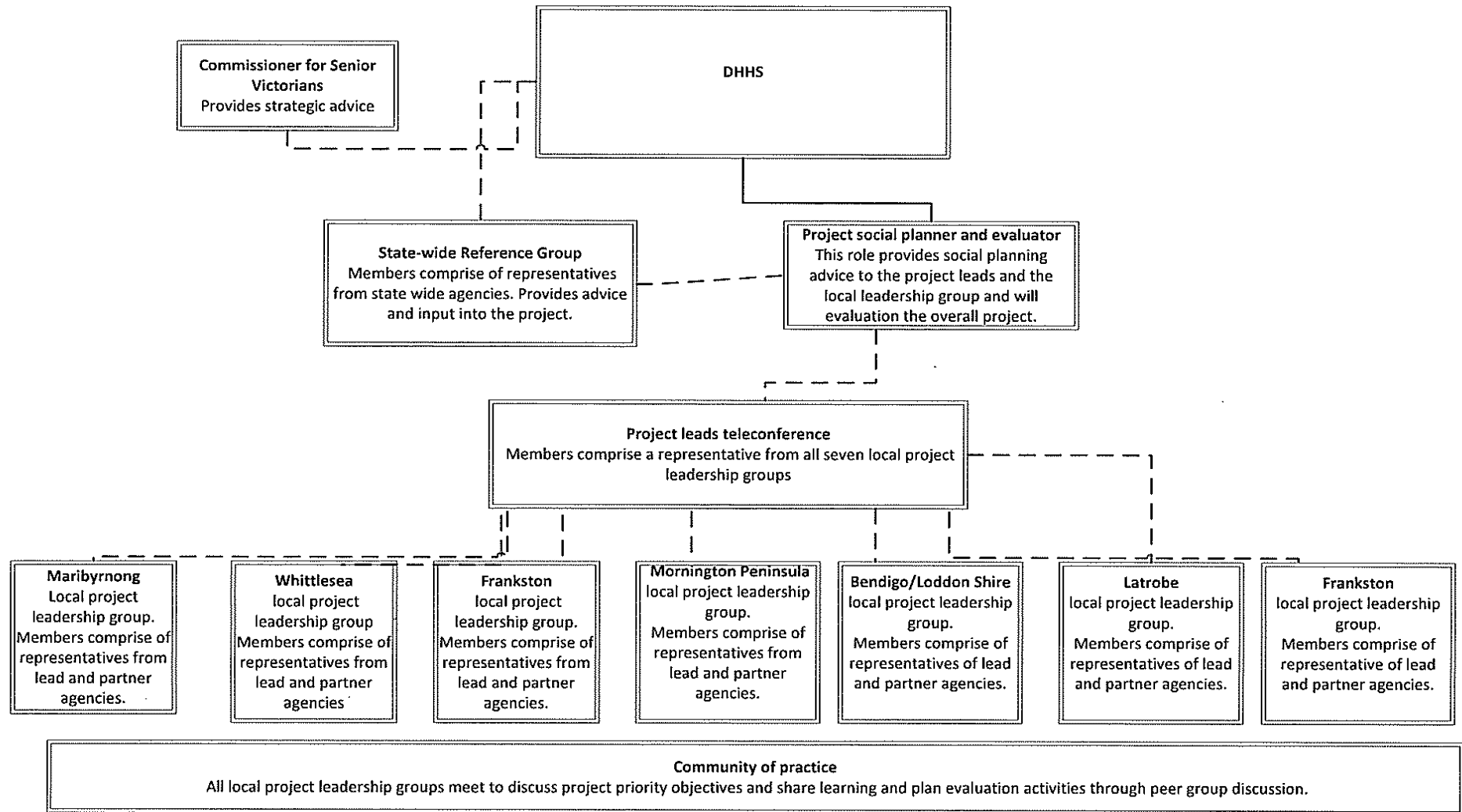
A **Statewide Reference Group** of departmental representatives and peak bodies with an interest in social inclusion and participation of older people met three times to advise on overall assumptions and priorities underpinning the initiative, theories of change, the evaluation approach, systemic issues of state-wide relevance; and helped share information between their state-wide networks and local member organisations.

An **external consultant**, Changesmith Consulting, was engaged to coordinate the development and dissemination of resources and tools, run face-to-face events, provide social planning support and undertake the evaluation of the initiative. Additionally Changesmith Consulting co-authored this report with DHHS.

A **Project Management Group (PMG)** met monthly consisting of the Commissioner for Senior Victorians, the planning and evaluation consultant and the DHHS contract manager. The PMG enabled regular communication



Figure 1: SSIP structure



## Section 4: Evaluation outcomes

### Alignment between state-wide and local government priorities

The objectives of the Strengthening Seniors Inclusion and Participation (SSIP) initiative were aligned with local government Health and Wellbeing Plans and Positive Ageing Plans and provided opportunity for participating councils to consider a different approach to working with and interacting with their older community members from a service provision model. This is particularly important for local governments as they recalibrate their role in response to Commonwealth reforms to in-home aged care. By the end of the year, it became evident that some Councils used SSIP very strategically, to inform the transition to the reformed system of in-home care.

If collaborative partnerships are to become an effective element of health and wellbeing plans or Positive Ageing strategies by state or local government, it was critical for the methodologies to enable the empowerment of local groups and networks to analyse the issues in each local area and to inform, and ideally steer, local responses. The Maribyrnong SSIP project was designed to test and develop a co-design approach using trained volunteer community leaders/peer engagers to engage isolated older people and develop activities that reflected their interests and required levels of comfort. This, by its nature, meant that the deliverables within the project plan took some time to define.

The SSIP initiative offered an opportunity to access extensive community development expertise, networks and local social knowledge that is not available within government agencies. At a state-wide level, SSIP demonstrated that it cannot be assumed that social participation by older people can be achieved without engaging them directly in the processes and decision-making.

### Local Project Leadership Group formation and effectiveness

The quality of partnership within the PLGs was considered important by the project leads. For example, the Whittlesea PLG used the Vic Health partnership analysis tool<sup>6</sup> to build partnership. The snapshot (which was positive) informed future discussion and priorities for the group.

Good collaborative relationships take time to develop. Pre-existing working relationships or collaborative arrangements provided a good platform for SSIP (albeit noting new and fresh networks was a strength noted by several PLGs). A common comment from PLG project leads was the importance of getting the right people on the PLGs with the right focus – an interest in the wider benefit - not there to primarily benefit one's own organisation.

Engagement of community leader/volunteers into project leadership would always require significant effort, as the PLGs are best led by busy, active people, but busy people are also running their own organisation, and as volunteers may also have family and travel commitments.

The Dandenong PLG was particularly self-propelled in terms of enthusiastic local leadership, but also the hardest to keep track when partners went overseas or needed time out due to illness. The risks associated with exceptionally busy voluntary leadership were also experienced by Bendigo-Loddon, Whittlesea, Frankston/Mornington Peninsula and Latrobe. This reliance created a risk for SSIP as a one-off initiative, but for a longer-term approach, the risk of relying on busy local volunteer leaders would clearly be outweighed by the benefits of relationship continuity and sustainability. Indeed, if an initiative of this kind couldn't engage local community leaders in a way that suits their busy lives, it would fail to maintain momentum.

PLG effectiveness was based on:

- **Vision:** A wide, inclusive vision with common purpose and collaboration; with a structure that can sustain itself after a one-off project

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/the-partnerships-analysis-tool>

- **People:** People who can think beyond their own organisation/client group/membership, with strong local networks and relationships and ability to engage/ get buy-in from older people within their community
- **Local champions:** A capacity and appetite for leadership - to lead conversations, led by partners in the community and within their networks
- **Data:** Based on life experiences, knowledge and curiosity that builds on local stories/narratives and wide practice knowledge and experience, access to sources of “hard data” and utilisation of data for learning and improving.
- Key attributes of an effective lead agency were:
- **Partnership capacity:** to create and utilise a Project Leadership Group and work in partnership; ability to build on local achievements and learning; openness to build new relationships and partnerships and to innovate; ability to co-design and build capabilities within partner organisations;
- **Executive sponsorship** from within their organisation
- **Community connections:** to design and develop place based working approaches and to forge strong inter-agency connections; access to data for learning and improving
- **Greater good:** focused on pathways supporting prevention of social isolation and loneliness of older people rather than reinforcing or protecting the interests of their own organisation.

## The role of local knowledge and networks

Some key sectors and groups were represented in several different project locations, presumably indicating the positive cultural inclination of these sectors, such as Neighbourhood Houses, libraries, U3A, ethno-specific groups and networks, and highly localised but longstanding groups such as sports clubs (Croquet and Bowls) and active seniors groups.

Appreciation of local context and networks was key to design of the awareness, education and or volunteer training programs, and the promotion of activities. Examples of useful material customised through PLG involvement included a session on building confidence in responding to dementia and a facilitated conversation about personal boundaries - defining what is “too close, too distant or just right” (Bendigo/Loddon and Mornington Peninsula).

In some cases, the local PLG built strong relationships where people hadn’t worked together before (e.g. Bendigo/Loddon, Latrobe, Dandenong) and in others, strengthened networks where they were pre-existing (e.g. through basing the Whittlesea SSIP within the Community Futures Ageing Cluster).

The Frankston and Mornington Peninsula projects demonstrated the importance of relationships in that the Frankston project lead was a long-term staff member who already knew local networks and had already trialled various strategies for engaging isolated people over the years.

## The importance of PLGs holding and leading an inclusive vision

The roles of local Project Leadership Groups (PLGs) were invaluable in leading implementation activity. Most PLGs developed into cohesive working groups focused on the priority objectives of the overall initiative. All project leadership groups spent time brainstorming the issues and priorities for their community. There was robust discussion in early stages, and in some cases the kernel of the action plan required significant changes during the year, thus demonstrating a high commitment from the partners.

*“We thought we’d find connectors and then go and find isolated people. In fact, the connectors have links to the people; what’s required is to educate and train people who are already connected”.*  
(Whittlesea PLG member)

Community partners used SSIP to impact the culture of their clubs and networks, with the formation of new approaches within clubs and groups such as new communication protocols, the formation of wellbeing teams, and new partnerships and approaches between clubs and groups in different sectors.

For several ethno-specific/cultural groups involved in the project leadership groups, there is a history of social exclusion. Partners commented that this has acted as a barrier to community members joining mainstream clubs and activities in the past and while it can sustain the specific club itself, the experience can lead to an inward-looking culture. Discussion in the project leadership groups indicated that some mainstream groups (for example, Rotary Clubs, Country Women's Association or University of the Third Age) may not appreciate the historical experiences of groups excluded from participation opportunities in their community (for example LGBTI specific groups or ethnic specific groups).

The value of PLGs taking a strong inclusive position was affirmed by numerous PLG members during the year – in particular described by the Whittlesea and Latrobe PLG evaluation workshop discussions. This reflected both the perspective of ethno-specific clubs such as Orthodox Greek Welfare in Morwell and several culturally specific clubs in Whittlesea as well as mainstream groups such as the U3A and CWA.

Other access and inclusion issues that came up were the importance of LGBTI inclusion (e.g. Mornington Peninsula and Maribyrnong), and the recognition of social exclusion dynamics where people are quite unwell and or living in transitional housing (e.g. Whittlesea, Dandenong).



## Section 5: Effectiveness of SSIP activity against the intended outcomes

Aside from considerations of the local and state-wide structure and the methodology of the project, the key question for the evaluation was the extent to which the activities met the intended outcomes.

### Enhanced participation of older people at local community level

All the local projects effectively engaged with isolated older people in numerous settings, whether at home or through referrals and active outreach.

Early in the initiative, there were expectations about people being “hard to reach”. While there are indeed many people in the community facing complex situations, project leads and project leadership group partners commented on a degree of “surprise” and ease in getting people engaged into ongoing programs and activities that were valued and enjoyed by the participant. There were numerous examples where all that was needed was a conversation with an isolated person in a shopping centre, a phone call, an invitation, or an offer to accompany a person to an event or program.

The opportunities to learn more about the factors driving isolation, and the ways to be more welcoming, drove significant cultural change among key partner organisations, and has created a desire to do more, especially where collaborative structures are ongoing or have potential to be ongoing. For some of the individuals engaged, they see great value in the initiative, and are now becoming “ambassadors” themselves – becoming club Welcomers, local Community Connectors or referrers for their network or street.

The clear majority of participant surveys and Project Leadership Group reflections reinforced that the SSIP initiative has been worthwhile. There was a small minority of community members who participated in surveys or conversations and did not seek to participate locally, or, in follow-up surveys or questionnaires, didn’t feel more connected after being engaged. There were also some busy community volunteers who were not able to commit as much as they might have intended but did gain greater awareness from the initiative. This reinforces the need to work with the people who do seek to participate and be open to many and varied methods to do this.

“We all want to be helpful in some way. Getting older means when I walk along the street, I smile at people and nothing comes back. This project means “I can be worthwhile somewhere not useless and a drain on people” (Diane used to be a foster carer, a dog rescuer and a bus driver for people with disabilities, Latrobe)

### Organisation sustainability

In terms of community organisation sustainability, there was less focus on governance than had been expected, and more on participation in awareness building, education, training and capacity building for inclusive practices and what makes a “welcoming” club or group. Training and awareness activity targeting groups and clubs was run in four locations and feedback was consistently positive, with follow-up sessions run in several cases.

### Strengthened working relationships

Working relationships and referral networks were strengthened across the collaborative structures at each site, between key networks, community partners and project participants.

Some of the Project Leadership structures were pre-existing and others were designed for SSIP. Both were effective in different ways in building cross-sectoral networks of interest. Examples included pre-existing collaborative structures, such as the Whittlesea Ageing Cluster of the Community Futures forum, and new structures, such as the Latrobe City “Welcoming and Age-Friendly” Project Leadership Group which grew out of previous older persons’ consultative structures. Locally, there was positive impact on community networking and an increased level of interest in what other organisations provide.

Local PLG members in numerous sites spoke of a heightened awareness and enthusiasm to refer people into other organisations as a result of knowing more about them.

## Community awareness

The SSIP initiative ensured that raising awareness of the detrimental impacts of social isolation was accompanied with opportunities to act. Rather than a media campaign with a focus on the perils of isolation, there were easy and positive actions that could be taken as a result of becoming more aware of the impact of loneliness and isolation on fellow residents. In terms of raising community awareness of the value of social participation, the common refrain from participants was “It’s about the conversations” with a view that inclusive behaviours at community level are underpinned by education and awareness-raising activity.

The main approach to building community awareness was through diverse face-to-face connections rather than seeking mainstream media coverage. This assumed that isolated people would respond better to face to face contact than newspaper articles. With some exceptions entailing newsletter articles and web-based promotions, the primary awareness activity was targeted activity with venues, clubs and group members rather than communications to one conflated audience.

Building awareness and confidence to act made a difference among community partners and volunteer community connectors. Feedback across all the sites where volunteer connectors or club members were educated or organised, made it clear that the more people know about the impacts of isolation and the more they see the positive impact of participation, the more motivated they were to behave in more inclusive ways and or invest effort to make their club or network more welcoming and inclusive. Feedback also indicated that, when made aware of opportunities, participation by older people who were feeling isolated was enhanced.



## Section 6: Overall Findings

### Validation of an issue of growing importance

The SSIP initiative validated the findings of the *Ageing is everyone's business* report that social isolation and loneliness is a significant issue to local communities and one that requires further attention. The interest and participation of over 200 stakeholders at the SSIP Statewide forum also demonstrated the importance of this issue to local communities.

The SSIP initiative identified many key learnings that can be transferred to future place based initiatives.

### Local level place based initiatives are effective in addressing social isolation and loneliness

Experience throughout the initiative confirmed the lessons from the *Ageing is Everyone's business* report i.e. that older people do seek opportunities to participate in a variety of local activities, and will participate if supported and welcomed. The initiative showed that a focus on creating welcoming and inclusive community organisations can have a profound impact on isolated people.

Local governments are well placed to respond to social isolation and loneliness. As local governments recalibrate their role in in-home care during the major national reforms underway, this initiative has shown they are well positioned to re-focus their support and engagement of older community members with a positive ageing lens.

Participants in the initiative indicated that the contributing enablers that make a difference and encourage seniors to take up opportunities are self-awareness of their situation and prioritising one's own wellbeing.

The local nature of participation was strongly encouraged in the initiative. Seniors contacted project volunteers and sought to access local activities and opportunities however some felt somewhat or significantly disconnected in their local community. Therefore it is important to understand that a lack of participation may not be due to a lack of seeking or valuing participation, rather it is a reflection of existing barriers that prevent participation and diverse needs of seniors that need to be understood and responded to, to create local opportunities.

It was important there was support for additional effort by volunteers from their club, group or by a staff member in a lead organisation such as volunteer resources centres, neighbourhood houses, libraries or Council officers, especially as the PLG structure reinforced a more inclusive "whole of community" focus rather than a focus on specific club or group needs. Such wider focus is a key contributor to creating a more welcoming community.

### Older people hold the networks and knowledge

Seniors are keen to participate and have the knowledge and networks required to generate ideas and solutions to address social isolation and loneliness in their local communities. The most successful local project structures engaged this knowledge and enthusiasm effectively.

Numerous activities were tested and developed during the SSIP initiative, however, the efficacy needed to be validated by those who understand being isolated and lonely. Finding ways to evaluate and reflect on activities with that perspective is critical to the long term success of newly created opportunities.

The initiative's assumption was that everyone will experience social isolation and loneliness at some stage of their life; however it was important to ensure that people with recent or current experience gained a voice in the local projects and that their needs and lived experience would inform the priorities.

Essentially, building sustainable partnerships and collaborative structures to create more welcoming communities is more successful when the priorities are determined by older people themselves, not by the needs of service delivery organisations or clubs' internal requirements.

## Partnerships and collaborative approaches are important and effective and are a key enabler of sustainability

An intended outcome of the program was for strengthened working relationships between community organisations at the local level, focused on improved seniors participation, including supported referral pathways.

Examples that illustrate the importance of different collaborations between partner organisations that did not include the lead agency are; the partnership between U3A and Brotherhood of St Laurence in Whittlesea; the partnership between Legacy and Bolton Clarke in Dandenong; the valuable relationships generated via the 'peer accreditation' in the Latrobe's "Welcoming and Age-Friendly" clubs and groups training program.

The additional value-add of investing in these working relationships cannot be over-stated. Numerous examples were given by project participants about how regular meetings enabled sharing of information and ideas which offer the promise of sustained effort after the project is officially completed.

Important enablers of effective and sustainable local partnerships include:

- **A diverse range of perspectives and knowledge** about the local context. Culturally competent awareness and responses are a priority. There is a need to consider cultural inclusion and to enable as much choice of activities as possible for older people, both inside a specific cultural or language community and within the mainstream community.
- **Time to plan and ensure the right partners and individuals are at the table.** Inviting a range of local community based agencies to meet and learn about each other's work and priorities is an important step to facilitate an environment where partnerships can form. The timeline and duration of the EOI offered only four weeks to enable people with many commitments to commit. Subsequently, several of the projects needed to reframe the partners and the project to get the right people around the table, with a realistic project plan. It is possible that a longer timeframe to develop an EOI might have given more momentum to the work sooner.
- **A shared inclusive vision, with a focus on achieving outcomes for the whole community.** When agency and community partners understand each other's perspectives and priorities, there is an opportunity for shared vision and responsibility when working on outcomes that will benefit the whole community.
- **Relationship continuity among the key community partners.** The importance of investing in continuity of relationships in local communities was critical to SSIP outcomes, this includes investment by key staff and organisation leaders, which appears to be directly relevant to the effectiveness and sustainability of local place based approaches.
- **Creation of the right atmosphere to inform and change attitudes and behaviours.** Generating culture and behaviour change by an organisation or club requires creation of a positive incentive or encouragement to inspire the organisation or club to move out of their comfort zone and try something different.

In theory, leadership succession and ensuring sustainable collaboration structures are a priority, but the reality is that key individuals make the difference, even when the structures and resources are set in place.

Some of the most successful partnerships created for SSIP linked to existing steering/reference groups within local government and the Primary Care Partnership and have enhanced the opportunities to continue to increase seniors inclusion and participation in their community post the life of the initiative.

Some of the sustainable outcomes from SSIP are:

- The U3A in Bendigo has developed a wellbeing team model that has been picked up by the U3A state- wide association to replicate across Victoria.
- Peninsula Transport Assist has engaged with Community Connectors to provide transport for older people to go on outings.

- Assessment Officers from Mornington Peninsula now use Community Connectors to refer, encourage and support isolated seniors try out clubs and groups.
- Shire of Mornington Peninsula is offering sessions to local community organisations on recruiting volunteers, governance and being welcoming to older people.
- Latrobe Regional Assessment Team will now refer clients to their support team who will support and accompany the interested seniors to a nominated group, club or social activity.
- The Latrobe Council Welcome and Age Friendly brand that can be recognised by seniors wanting to join a group or club is replicable in other locations.
- U3A in Mornington Peninsula is looking at delivering programs into individual homes of seniors who are isolated.
- Training and education resources have been developed and are available for any club or group to use e.g. the awareness raising material developed and used in Frankston/Mornington Peninsula and Bendigo and the material delivered in Latrobe are available for any club or group to use.

An additional contributor to sustainability at the local level would be to ensure resources are made available in a central location. Several partners suggested it would be helpful to set up an “Ageing is Everyone’s Business” statewide hub to coordinate and resource social inclusion activity within local government and community networks. The Department of Health and Human Services is developing a Toolbox of interventions that will be available resource to download from their website.

## **The importance of connecting people to improve social participation**

The SSIP local projects focussed on making personal connections that increased the likelihood of increased participation of isolated and lonely seniors. At the core of many projects was a commitment to engage people to find other people who might be lonely or isolated. The projects did this in various ways i.e. through recruitment and training of Community Connector volunteers, engaging existing seniors leaders and champions within the community, cross referrals through agencies, buddy systems and warm referrals to support an individual’s introduction to a new activity.

Social isolation and loneliness in older people can be gradually reduced across a community when connecting one person at a time. What might be considered a small intervention, to connect one person, was repeated in many instances across the initiative, leading to positive outcomes that have had a lasting impact on multiple senior individuals and groups within a community.

## **The importance of age-friendly and welcoming organisations and communities**

The four statewide priority focus areas aligned with a level of partner interest, especially where there was an ability to design the components at the local level. There was strong interest in using one-off funding for new approaches to enhancing participation, and the organisational culture of clubs, groups and networks, and refreshing the offerings and referral networks of clubs and groups. It was felt that organisational governance is a priority but not necessarily the top priority for investment of these one-off grants. Aside from sustainable club governance, “welcoming” clubs were seen to be more successful. The development of well-being teams, education/awareness of the importance of offering a welcome, and the benefits of inclusive activities were reinforced during the project.

To foster inclusion the creation of the right atmosphere to inform changed attitudes and behaviours is important. Generating culture and behaviour change by an organisation or club requires an appetite for change, a degree of positive incentive or encouragement, and some removal from ones “comfort zone” especially as many groups see themselves as already being highly welcoming and friendly. A new member, a peer auditor or a person who feels they lack key attributes needs to experience the inclusion. The most successful projects educated, persuaded and inspired individuals and organisations to generate accessible and inclusive change.

## **The importance of cultural diversity and intergenerational activity**

It is important to note the different cultural and cross cultural perspectives on loneliness and that we cannot assume that a whole community thinks about social isolation and loneliness of older people from an anglo-celtic perspective. Older people bring a wealth of cultural diversity into the community. The history of culturally and ethnically specific Seniors Clubs and Aboriginal Elder Care community responses are to some extent a result of exclusion from mainstream community activities, as well as a choice to connect with people with a common cultural perspective. Discussion at the Statewide Forum illustrated the need to consider cultural inclusion and to enable as much choice of activities as possible for older people, both inside a specific cultural or language community and within the mainstream community.

For seniors' clubs in areas where migration patterns have changed there is clearly a challenge in that younger/second generation residents may not seek to participate in a culturally specific club when they retire, they may prefer to join a sports club or reading group. Whereas in areas with large numbers of first generation migrants there is evidently still a strong desire to gather as part of a cultural or language-specific community group.

Older people also want to be able to choose to participate with their peers in "seniors" activities as well as ensuring a range of intergenerational participation options are available. There was strong feedback on this from program participants. There was a high level of initial interest in intergenerational projects, which relied on the right mix of community partners. The realisation of this priority depended on the partners involved, such as Neighbourhood Houses, libraries and sporting clubs. The Dandenong intergenerational homework club was a useful SSIP project in that older volunteers enjoyed supporting young people with homework at the library. Overall, the SSIP initiative, through its intergenerational projects showed that social isolation and loneliness is "everyone's business", not just a priority for seniors clubs or senior focused organisations.

English language computer literacy is particularly challenging for low income people, with limited English literacy. Ethno-specific groups involved in the projects in Maribyrnong, Whittlesea, Dandenong and Latrobe discussed the challenges for older people who start to retreat to their first language just as they get to the point of needing to access more systems online. This is a key issue for consideration by service system designers. There is a common assumption that young people are better at computer and digital engagement than older people, and that a good focus for intergenerational engagement is with digital engagement and use of social media. However the SSIP initiative didn't reach a conclusion on whether intergenerational approaches are more effective than peer-based approaches with older people regarding use of digital platforms.

## **A policy framework for preventing social isolation and loneliness could influence and directly address some of the key systemic barriers and enablers**

The SSIP initiative highlighted the role of state government in seed funding projects to address social isolation and loneliness and has demonstrated that this should be a priority area for future funding. In addition to continuing place-based initiatives, there is need for a broader policy framework to guide future actions in a systemic manner.

A range of systemic barriers and enablers were revealed during planning and implementation of the local projects, which in some cases drove the design of local projects and in other cases surfaced issues for attention if a holistic approach to preventing and reducing social isolation and loneliness is to be achieved. The SSIP initiative confirms that a local focus on social isolation and loneliness alone cannot improve systemic barriers, instead it requires the support of a policy framework that engages both local and state government to collaborate and strategically address and reduce systemic barriers, while improving enablers to social participation.

Below is a list of the systemic barriers identified during the initiative.

- **Respond to the digital divide.** The moves to digital environments by government for example, My Aged Care and the need to navigate online service systems are a key challenge for older people. A follow-up from the SSIP initiative might be a focused effort to support community committee members with computer skills and help build confidence to lodge forms as well as show others how to access websites. This is a particular challenge for older people who start to retreat to their first language just as they reach the point of needing to access more systems online. This is a key issue for consideration by online service system designers.
- **Access to affordable, accessible transport.** Access to transport was a system-wide issue that was canvassed regularly, including gaining the highest rating mention in the final Statewide Forum feedback on future priorities. Community buses are highly valued. Initiatives to plan more integrated use of all local sources of community transport could be further encouraged, as part of a place-based approach to strengthen the social participation of older residents
- **Consumer Directed Care.** Service delivery models and funding streams to older people are increasingly person centred, which may act as a barrier to collective activities funded through the mainstream system. Indeed, several community partners reported cuts to active outreach/social inclusion programs that were previously resourced through Home and Community Care (HACC) funding.
- **Barriers to social inclusion within residential aged care.** The Whittlesea project revealed a flaw in the belief that residential aged care offers social inclusion for residents. In fact, residents of residential aged care are excluded from access to community transport, and this further isolates these people from access to programs and activities in the community.
- **User pays models are challenging when participants are on low incomes.** Low income levels mean that user-pays cannot cover the full cost of activities that engage people, to prevent social isolation and loneliness. As a positive example of addressing affordability barriers for volunteer Connectors, Plenty Valley Arts Centre offered a free “companion card’ ticket to Connectors as an incentive to bring older people to the Arts Centre.

## Appendix 1: Community of Practice

Two statewide Community of Practice meetings were held, the first focusing on the program logic and theories of change for the respective projects to synthesise a common theory of change. The aim was to clarify outputs and outcomes to assist in prioritising opportunities as they arose during the project, in terms of the overall scale of the issue being addressed (reducing social isolation across the community) commensurate with the changes that each project leadership group had the capacity to influence.

Figure 1 shows the combined priority matrix, containing the five nominated outputs and outcomes from each site. Each group of PLG representatives developed their own theory of change and logic chart as a consequence of this work. An example of one site's logic chart is at Figure 2.

The Community of Practice also developed a big picture vision:

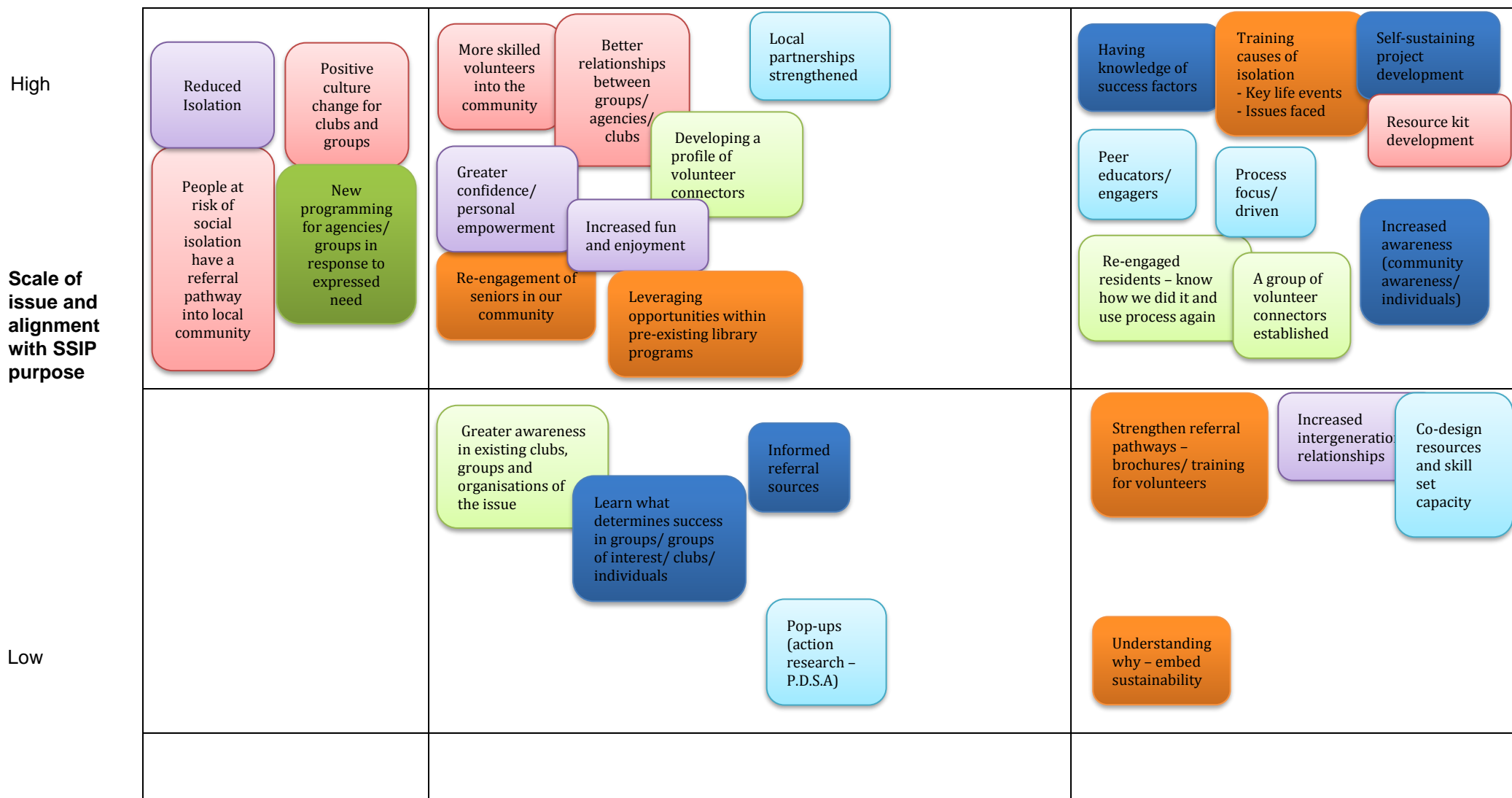
- More Victorians value the social participation of older people and take actions to maintain and support social or community participation of older people
- Project outcomes influence council planning regarding service and program provision to seniors, and influence community engagement practices in local government
- Community-level engagement projects recognise the need for systemic responses to social, economic, age-based and spatial inequalities
- More Victorians consider social and emotional wellbeing as well as financial considerations when planning for their own retirement.

The second Community of Practice meeting was run by popular request and wasn't in the original project plan. It was timed towards the end of the implementation phase, when the six project leadership groups were considering next steps and how to sustain the achievements across the seven sites. The agenda focused on progress reports and consideration of learnings and future directions for the work, and a highlight was hearing from a formerly isolated community member who had become involved in the Latrobe City project and felt confident to come and talk to the larger group.

The Community of Practice was essential to create a cohesive program and body of knowledge, and to integrate the seven individual local projects into a larger action-research initiative with specific objectives.

Feedback from project leads was that the Community of Practice was invaluable as a way to build momentum and maintain focus, and for volunteers on the project leadership groups it provided a welcome opportunity to build their networks and enthusiasm to sustain the work after the completion of the project.

Figure 2: Combined priority matrix developed 5 May 2017.



Low

Our capacity to effect change (in mindset, behaviours, etc.)

High

Maribyrnong Whittlesea Dandenong Bendigo/Loddon Latrobe Frankston/Mornington



Figure 3: Example logic from one site.

## SSIP Mornington /Frankston logic



## Appendix 2: Participant feedback - SSIP Statewide Forum 20/4/18

Out of 220 participants at the Forum, about half of the people filled out a feedback form suggesting individual and organisational ‘next steps’ and suggestions on future priorities. One hundred forms were collated and summarised. The feedback on “your top 2 priorities for the future” is collated below.



### Transport (30 comments mentioned transport)

- Need more low cost transport options, especially in rural areas, to enable senior citizens to access communities, programs and activities
- A minibus would help seniors access different groups and volunteers could pick clients up from home
- Ensuring that transport is senior-friendly - many move around with wheelie frames, walking sticks etc.
- Transport needs to be regular and affordable, with easy access to timetables
- Ways to transport people in rural areas - cabs for seniors program (Brisbane Cabs), door to door transport
- Making sure there is transport available for those who can't or don't drive.

### Funding (20 comments mentioned funding)

- Encouraging the government to invest money in a prevention model and increasing initiatives for social inclusion at all ages
- Investing money into advertising services and responding to the needs of senior citizens
- Ongoing funding from government to reduce isolation by encouraging community action “support should be inclusive rather than intrusive. Also need to be ongoing rather than ‘flavour of the month’ to ensure results”.
- Funding community services such as libraries
- Funding should be provided to sustain successful programs that have been addressing social isolation, as well as networks and organisations that have been sharing knowledge.

- Feeding money from gambling support funds to recreational activities as a way of preventing social isolation and gambling addiction
- Create age-friendly grants which target the inclusion of senior citizens across Victoria and supports community organisations working collaboratively to come up with innovative ideas
- Provide resources and funding to support volunteers connecting socially isolated seniors.

## Communications

- Developing promotional tools such as videos, posters and brochures to raise awareness of social isolation
- Ensuring that we communicate and promote services and supports for senior citizens and focus on the community driving what it looks like, rather than bureaucracy dictating
- Encourage an Australian campaign to end loneliness and isolation
- Campaigning around intergenerational respect and caring for elderly lonely people
- Asking and listening to multicultural communities in terms of what they need from us when it comes to leadership - mastering two-way communication
- Sharing success stories from SSIP to dispel myths and share learnings
- Look at advertising in local newspapers, community and commercial radio about the effects of isolation on people in communities
- A "Take care of your neighbour" campaign to encourage people to look out for one another
- Promotion of activities with an intergenerational focus or that encourage families to spend time with older members
- Support for government and health services to understand and develop palliative care services in an easily understood and accessible relevant form.

## Awareness and Education (9 comments mentioned 'awareness')

- Talking about loneliness and acknowledging that it's everyone's issue and affects a wide range of people in different ways
- Educating all in the community about the need to address social isolation and the problems it can cause - both for people who are socially isolated and communities
- Making people aware of their social responsibility to look after their neighbours, through television campaigns, social media, radio
- Stressing the importance and benefits of social inclusion to service providers and the public
- Changing the discourse around ageing from being a problem to being an opportunity - to do new things, meet new people etc.
- Encouraging younger family members to help older members deal with being lonely, access services and support networks that are right for them
- Making sure communities are aware of the right information on where to go, who to talk to, welcoming practices at social groups - particularly through health service providers who can spot social isolation
- Educating and upskilling health professionals to recognise the harms of social isolation and provide information on social connectivity to patients.

## Intergenerational/Intercultural (10 comments mentioned intergenerational)

- Understanding the diverse ways that loneliness manifests itself - especially for diverse groups - indigenous people, LGBTI people, and people from CALD backgrounds. Ensuring that ALL communities have a voice in the social isolation and loneliness conversation.
- Encouraging intergenerational projects and programs so that younger and older generations engage with one another - this could be outings, meals, digital literacy etc.
- Building the capacity of CALD seniors through formal and informal training, leadership training, working with organisations



- Encouraging intercultural relationships to share learning - especially of languages
- Take an intersectional approach
- Create intercultural/intergenerational hubs where diversity is encouraged, individuals can come for information and to interact with a range of generations and cultures
- Talk about cultural differences between the old and the young, with the aim of closing the gap
- Host programs with a CALD/LGBTI focus for those communities
- Advertising programs and services in other languages on community radio to ensure the message is spread to CALD groups
- Recognise the diversity in community and work across it
- Ensuring speakers at your events are diverse and properly represent the communities of Victoria - CALD, Disabilities, LGBTI, regional, Indigenous.

## **Mobilise networks**

- Working collaboratively with other services in order to share information and opportunities and find solutions
- Supporting partnerships in this space - especially those which target vulnerable groups
- Ensuring organisations work better to address the issue - broader community approach involved everyone from church groups to school communities
- Developing networks between service providers, which helps with referrals
- Creating a combined approach with general practitioners, which helps GPs refer those who are isolated and lonely to the relevant groups or support networks
- Build links with Australian Centre for Loneliness (Swinburne).

## **Engage and listen to older people**

- Working with older people in the community to ensure we offer the best solutions to their problems. This could be through face to face consultation or asking for feedback from clients to ensure continuous improvement.
- The key point to consider is constantly asking those who are socially isolated or lonely what their needs are and how we can address them.
- Engaging, listening and responding accordingly.

## **Project ideas**

- Creating a statewide 'Safe houses' campaign (like in Manchester, UK) in retail outlets that could offer isolated senior community members a place to drop in, sit and chat. Similar to those offered for school children, but for seniors in shops and community services.
- Marking places as 'Age Friendly' with a cup of tea on the sticker
- Creating "sit and chat" buddy benches in public spaces and shopping centres. When you sit there you are open to a conversation, similar to how they operate in schools for kids.
- Creating a Seniors Hub or an age-friendly drop in centre which caters to the needs of seniors - open spaces with public toilets, close to where people live, accessible transport
- Ensuring that local councils have designated staff to address the social and emotional needs of seniors/ageing community e.g. Positive Ageing Officer to encourage partnerships with clear direction and policy in response to "Ageing is Everybody's Business"
- Creating an organisation which assists local government with setting up SSIP Programs and incorporating it into what they already do. Advice from those who have done it before and connected different networks and groups, rather than having to start from scratch.
- Look at pokie venues and how they are successful at attracting older people into their venues - cheap meals, free tea and coffee, door to door transport, great heating and cooling, fun venue, sense of heading out and going to a community venue, open to all demographics.

## Build on the SSIP projects:

### Community Connectors

- Creating more opportunity and capacity for people to be trained as “community connectors”, but ensuring that the right people are chosen with screening and support.
- Encouraging and supporting seniors to sit on boards and run clubs in order to create a peer support model.
- Connectors and buddy schemes work, so develop more training resources for volunteers in terms of creating connections and relationship building.
- Supporting the initial contact and referring individuals to community organisations
- Using data from SSIP to target connections to these groups and continue connection work with those already identified.

### Welcoming & Age Friendly

- Rolling out Latrobe’s Welcoming and Age Friendly campaign across the state with a wider community focus to encourage a feeling of belonging and acceptance for seniors.

## Community development rather than new services

- Encourage a more active community where we make it easier for neighbours to engage with one another through community projects and encourage social responsibility
- Solutions often lie within the community rather than with creating more services - create opportunities for communities to discover and promote these solutions and make decisions to drive the change
- Helping to build people in the community/volunteers’ capacity to engage with older people and welcome them into the community
- Providing people in the community with tips on how to support and engage with others and encourage a more connected community. This could range from looking after one another’s pets to sharing food etc., but all encouraging a shift in attitude.

## Education and prevention

- As a society, we need to recognise that the effects of loneliness can be as damaging as smoking in terms of health, and put funding into prevention
- Start talking to people at a younger age to help them prepare to transition into retirement - gauge what they might like to do post-work in terms of activities, hobbies, living arrangements etc. Encourage people to think about being active in old age.
- Ensuring seniors have access to the information they need in order to engage in the community, support options, programs and groups
- Working with businesses and organisations to link service delivery of aged services to pre-retirement employees. Give employees opportunities and advice on preparing for their future beyond work in terms of how they spend their time, keeping well etc.

## Engage Clubs, Groups, Activities

- Encourage good mentoring programs at activities for senior people, to ensure inclusion into groups. Promote these to lessen anxiety over joining!
- Support for local and state government for clubs and groups, to help them get lonely and isolated people to join
- Encourage members to talk to new people, gain confidence, have fun and in turn, feel less isolated
- Provide clubs and groups with the training and resources they need to engage older members and make sure they have structures to welcome them and make sure no members feel excluded. Also ensuring training covers governance and sustainability.

- Work with community groups, libraries, schools etc. to find out the gaps in activities and how they can be improved.
- Providing more accommodation and space for groups to use within Council areas
- Promote the importance of a friendly welcoming face when joining a new club or activity
- Work with community facilities to negotiate reduced fees for seniors (senior card discounts as well).

## Local government priorities

- Recruitment of a few more senior people in the senior service delivery workspace in councils rather than purely as part of a volunteer pool
- Improve communication, connection, building friendship e.g. Welcoming and Building Relationship, Trust Building
- Develop LGA working group - issues, opportunities, workshop on key business
- Urban planning to support inclusive communities
- Work with community facilities to negotiate reduced fees for seniors (senior card discounts as well).

## Fix big system issues

- Lack of knowledge of IT
- Digital link without fear of getting virus attack on the machine!
- Lack of access to internet (bank, Centrelink)
- Fix homelessness
- Sorting out the “murkiness” of aged services reform and losing sight of people’s needs in service provision and change service provides
- Universal access and design of facilities also needs to be promoted!

## Research and evaluation

- Finding out what works in addressing existing problem
- Research to better understand the barriers and enablers and how to find the hand to reach and what is the connection to social inclusion/exclusion
- Need to do more research, continue to support similar programs and ensure that positive ageing agenda is not lost within the Aged Care reform process
- Broaden the discussion to reflect the issue being shared amongst all age groups, as mentioned by Dr Julianna from Brigham University
- Understanding what the key barriers are
- Electoral rolls - Families of potentially isolated people, “isolation census”.

## Understand the needs of individuals

- Ensure that both partners in a relationship are enjoying a meaningful and enjoyable life (i.e. neither are isolated)
- Identify where to meet individuals
- Not all people want to leave home and join a group
- Improving communication skills that assist with drawing out needs and inspirations of the isolated.

## Other themes

- **Taking a multi-pronged approach to address the issue.** Not one project or program is going to address the issue. With inclusion added to the agenda of every organisation, conducting mutually reinforcing activities, hopefully we can begin to make an impact in this space. Need to consider policy at all levels, physical environments, social environments.

- **Elder abuse.** How can you support or make aware that family members are abusing their elderly parents. Elderly parents do not realise or want to admit that this is happening. Many not aware that it is elder abuse.

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