Creating Social Connection, Belonging and Purpose Toolkit.

The following toolkit provides an overview of evidence-informed approaches to creating Social Connection, Belonging and Purpose, to help prevent and reduce alcohol and other drug (AOD) harms in your community.

1. Creating Social Connection, Belonging and Purpose overview – key points for LDATs

- Creating Social Connection, Belonging and Purpose refers to activities that increase a person's state of: feeling cared about by others, caring about others, and having a sense of belonging to a group or community.[1]

- These types of connections can help reduce feelings of loneliness and social isolation and can improve a person's health and social/emotional well-being – which may, in turn, protect against alcohol and other drug-related harms.[2, 3]

- Literature on this topic is often focused on older age groups, where loneliness/isolation is more common and difficult to address, but having little or poor quality connection to others is harmful for all ages and most programs can be adapted to suit different age groups.[4]

- There are plenty of accessible programs LDATs can consider to inspire people to participate in social activities in their community. It may also be beneficial for LDATs to partner with existing organisations that already have a network of these programs/activities.

Table 1: Factors that protect against AOD and factors that increase risk of AOD[1, 5-9]

Protective factors	Risk factors
• Involvement in programs/activities that build or maintain purpose and direction • Sense of belonging and engagement with community • Participation in social/recreational activities • Development of new, positive relationships • Cultural activities that promote connection to culture	• Isolation (geographical and social) • Lack of engagement • Unemployment • Mental health issues • Life transition

1.1 Drawing on existing programs

A number of programs have been shown to be effective in improving social connection, a sense of belonging and purpose for adults.

Act Belong Commit ⭐🧍
Evidence-based health promotion campaign that encourages people to maintain their mental wellbeing by adopting habits and behaviours that are known to protect mental health.[7]
[Home - Act Belong Commit | Promoting Positive Mental Health in WA](#)

Men's Sheds ⭐🧍
Non-profit community based organisations where men meet to share common interests and work on projects together.[10] Enables (mostly) older men to remain active, connect with friends, contribute to the community and maintain purpose and self-esteem.[11] https://mensshed.org/

Senior companion programs ⭐🧍
Volunteers help older adults to maintain their independence and live in their own homes by carrying out various tasks such as friendly visiting, transportation to medical appointments and social events, delivering groceries, preparing meals, helping with housekeeping, and providing supportive phone calls.[12] https://seniorhelpers.com.au/how-we-help/companion-care/

Active Lifestyles for All (ALFA) ⭐🧍
Trained health mentors assist physically inactive people to exercise for one session of thirty minutes each week for thirteen weeks. The exercise or sports activity takes place in a neighbourhood healthy lifestyle centre which incorporates a café and an area for social interaction.[13]

Circle of Friends ⭐🧍
Brings a small group of older, isolated adults (typically) together with a facilitator each week for three months to combat isolation and make new friends. Group meetings include activities such as exercise, discussions, therapeutic writing and artistic pursuits that help to build a group ethos and develop personal connections.[14, 15]

Life Activities Clubs (Victoria) ⭐🧍
Offers physical, social and recreational opportunities for people aged fifty plus. Members pay an annual fee and can enjoy a range of activities such as golf, exercise classes, walking groups, craft, book groups or cultural activities.[16] https://www.life.org.au/home/

CATCH Community Sport ⭐🧍
Research project that uses 'community sports' as a way of offering excluded people a safe and welcoming place where they can build agency, confidence, self-esteem and adopt healthy practices. In this context, 'community sports' are non-competitive with a low skill threshold and can be attractive to people who are disadvantaged for various reasons (e.g. homeless, use of substances, mental illness).[9]

> **Reclink Australia** ⭐ 🧍
> Provides evidence-based sport and recreation programs to disadvantaged Australians to create socially inclusive, life-changing opportunities.[17] https://reclink.org/

> **Community Garden** ☆ 🧍
> Plots of land are allocated to individuals to create gardens of their choice in a communal environment. Often very social in nature, as it typically brings together local residents of different ages, genders and cultures.[2] https://communitygarden.org.au/

1.2 Guiding principles

- Approaches that seek to build social connection, belonging and purpose in communities should focus on increasing and maintaining involvement in activities that:
  - build and maintain purpose and direction
  - create opportunities that enable social connections
  - support the development of new and positive relationships with others
  - promote and support connection to culture and country
  - provide healthy and safe spaces for participants, which may in some instances require partnerships to improve local amenity or co-purposing of spaces such as council spaces, sports clubs, local community services or businesses.[1, 5-9]

- LDATs should consider delivering Act Belong Commit as a tested, well-resourced program that started in Western Australia with an existing framework of support. LDATs could possibly negotiate your role with the organisation, such as becoming a formal Act Belong Commit partner, or utilising the program, its tools and resources within your own networks and region or area.[6, 7, 18]

- LDATs can support Men's Sheds by:
  - promoting men's sheds in the community and referring interested parties to sheds near them
  - offering advice and brief interventions on substance use matters and other health issues in a safe and non-judgemental environment
  - encouraging a wider membership (especially among younger men)
  - supporting the development of new Sheds where there is an unmet need. Current Men's Shed locations are listed on the AMSA website: https://mensshed.org/find-a-shed/?geodir_search=1&stype=gd_place&s.

- LDATs could investigate the need for a Senior Companions Program to assist older people in their own homes. Check out Senior Helpers to see if they have a location near by: https://seniorhelpers.com.au/where-to-find-us/ or you could engage with other programs that may already be in existence through local councils or the non-profit sector. LDATs may also like to consider other groups or populations that could benefit from this type of program (e.g. vulnerable young people).

- LDATs could provide exercise programs for isolated or disaffiliated young or older people. One consideration is the need to ensure that the active participants are physically able to be involved without undue risk.[13] (See section 1.3 below.)

- LDATs should consider the Circle of Friends concept. Circle of Friends utilises a wide range of talents as group leaders and it doesn't need large numbers of participants to produce positive medium to longer term results for people experiencing loneliness.[14, 15]

- LDATs could approach local councils or other community organisations and see if they offer life/social activity clubs – or other programs that involve physical, social and recreational opportunities for mature-aged people. In Victoria, Life Activities clubs are listed here: https://www.life.org.au/the-clubs/

- LDATs could promote involvement in community sport for people who lack social connection. Nearly all communities will have grounds, courts, ovals, halls, and sports equipment. You could:
  - support the community work of Reclink, which has programs around Australia. A list of state and territory contacts is available on their website: https://reclink.org/about/staff
  - offer vulnerable or isolated people the opportunity to take part in (non-competitive) social sport for fun, enjoyment, social participation, health and fitness. You'll need to find instructors who can work with people of all sporting abilities.[9, 17]
  - encourage older (and younger) people to increase their social participation and help community life, by volunteering at a community sports club.[19]
  - encourage friendship groups to join a club together, either to play sport or to volunteer, as a way of increasing sporting participation and volunteers.[20]
- LDATs could investigate community gardening: this is likely to be a popular option in many locations for diverse groups of all ages. Community gardens address many social determinants of health, improve social connection and can improve health and wellbeing.[2] A current garden might want or need new members, or a new garden could be developed. Securing a plot of land would be the first task and local councils might be in a position to assist or advise.[2] You can see what community gardens are currently available here: https://communitygarden.org.au/. Alternatively, your council might have similar programs and may be willing to work with you on such a project.

1.3 Considerations for planning and delivery

Attention to **how** a program is delivered or implemented is just as important as **what** is delivered, when it comes to your project's outcomes.

Implementation considerations for planning and delivery

> **The 5Ws**
>
> Being clear about what you want to do and the outcomes you want to achieve will support your LDAT to deliver a Creating Social Connection, Belonging and Purpose program in your community in a safe and effective way, as well as track success as you go.
>
> - **What** do you want to happen? (activity)
> - **Who** will it happen with? (direct audience)
> - **Why** will it happen? (outcome – e.g. improving an identified gap for that audience)
> - **When** will it occur? (time frame – e.g. over 6 months)
> - **Where** will it occur? (location).

> **Measuring success**
>
> Once you know what outcomes you want to achieve you need to measure the success of your activities so that you know how effective they were. You can do this by evaluating your activities using process and impact measures.
>
> - **Process measures:** these relate to how your activity is being delivered. In other words, they help you to monitor if the implementation of your activity went according to plan, e.g. did you reach the targeted number of attendees at your event? Did you run the targeted number of workshops that you originally planned?
> - **Impact measures:** these relate to the short-term difference your activity has made on the community. Impact measures seek to increase protective factors, decrease risk factors, or change how people think about AOD harms, e.g. did people report having more knowledge of AOD harms after attending your event? Did people report feeling more connected to their community after participating in your workshop?

Demographics

Your LDAT should consider providing a variety of events and activities that are designed for people of all ages, abilities, and socio-economic groups.[21] For example, senior companion programs may be more suitable for older age groups, while Reclink may be more suited to younger age groups.

Many of the initiatives also have a more universal application, meaning they can be taken up by people of every age, gender or background. This includes things like community gardening and mild forms of exercise (e.g. walking, dancing, yoga, bowls, swimming).[14, 15] They are also suitable for people experiencing a mental illness or intellectual disability.

Cultural considerations and adaptability

Depending on your community, you may be able to adapt existing programs to suit specific cultural needs. For example, an adaptation of the Act Belong Commit program was made by the Aboriginal community of Roebourne in Western Australia in 2015-16.[18] See here: https://www.actbelongcommit.org.au/programs-initiatives/aboriginal-program/

There have also been a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Men's Sheds: https://www.guparr.com/

Working with community partners

Other than the organisations listed above, community partners may also include:

- sporting clubs
- arts organisations
- community leaders (e.g. local faith leaders)
- representative groups (e.g. lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse and intersex)
- local councils
- libraries
- police
- schools (primary, secondary, tertiary)
- Lions, Rotary and Apex clubs
- community development, health promotion and youth workers
- local employers and workplaces
- traders and business associations
- multicultural groups and other cultural groups
- primary health services (e.g. general practitioners, pharmacists, dentists)
- community health centres and Neighbourhood Houses
- health services and hospitals
- alcohol and other drug services and sector workers
- Elder groups.

Resources required

Below is an indicative list of resources required to effectively deliver Social Connection, Belonging and Purpose activities:

- basic administrative tools, including access to stationery
- venue/s for meetings – with suitable access for people with a disability
- catering for events and meetings
- police checks/Working With Children checks (these are mandatory when working with young people)
- insurance and liability coverage (where appropriate).

Your LDAT may choose to consider allocating some of your Community Action Plan grant money towards some of these resources (where money is required).

Risk to participants

In developing this toolkit, our review identified several programs that can be recommended for implementation by LDATs. One caveat, however, is that some involve a level of risk to participants, which must be understood and mitigated by LDATs. For example:

- offering personal support to older people in their homes involves an intrusion of privacy and requires a high level of trust in the helpers
- the exercise and sport options naturally carry a risk of personal injury
- the operation of tools and machinery in Men's Sheds carries a risk of accidents.

One way of mitigating these risks is for LDATs to partner with organisations that have experience in these domains, such as Act Belong Commit, Australian Men's Sheds Association, Life Activities Victoria and Reclink. You can also consider other organisations in the community that share the interest of combating isolation and promoting social connection and social participation. LDATs will also need to be assured that volunteers/facilitators, etc. have the appropriate training, skills and knowledge to carry out the tasks.

2. Delivering Social Connection, Belonging and Purpose programs: key activities and measuring success

This section outlines key measurable activities associated with delivering and evaluating a Social Connection, Belonging and Purpose program.

You will need to deliver at least one of the below activities and evaluate it using process and impact measures (see 1.3 Considerations for planning and delivery).

The programs and approaches in this toolkit can be used as a setting for the delivery of your activity (e.g. an event run in a Men's Shed), or the activity can be delivered separately. Your Relationship Manager can help you to decide which approach is best. You can also tailor your approach by adding additional activities that suit your community's needs and evaluating them using additional process and impact measures.

Measurable activities for delivering and evaluating a Social Connection, Belonging and Purpose program are:

- **Training or workshops**
  An event that is held for the specific purpose of training community members in a new skill set, and/or delivering a structured presentation aimed at increasing knowledge about risk and/or protective factors associated with an AOD health issue.

- **Campaigns or education and awareness raising activities**
  A coordinated series of targeted messages delivered across one or more platforms (e.g. social media, pamphlets, radio commercials, etc.) that is aimed at minimising risk factors and/or increasing protective factors associated with AOD use.

- **Events or forums**
  One or more planned occasions where community members and/or relevant stakeholders come together, either face-to-face or virtually, to share ideas, learn new information, and connect with one another over ideas or activities aimed at minimising risk factors and/or increasing protective factors associated with AOD use.

> Evaluation is a critical component of delivering your program and needs to be factored in at every stage of planning and delivery. You'll find more detailed information on effective evaluation measures in our essential guide for LDATs: Evaluation Tools Resource. Your LDAT will also be guided to select appropriate process and impact measures when you're developing your Community Action Plan (CAP) online.
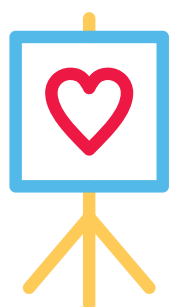
3. Delivering Social Connection, Belonging and Purpose: key steps

The key steps involved in delivering Social Connection, Belonging and Purpose are provided below as a useful starting point for developing your Community Action Plan activity. Note: these steps are an indicative guide only and it's important to tailor your approach to your local community.

Step 1: Engaging the community

- Identify community organisations that you could partner with (see section 1.3 above) and find someone in the organisation who can act as a champion and invest time into a program or activity. A champion may be in a leadership role, have an influential personality or be a proactive person who is passionate about preventing alcohol and other drug-related harms.

- Identify your target community - be mindful that communities can be defined in different ways. Will you target a geographic community, where people share a location? A community of interest, where people share identity, values, beliefs and social norms? Or a virtual community, where people interact via technology? You may also choose to target the community as a whole, rather than a specific age group or demographic.

- Discuss with the target community how Social Connection, Belonging and Purpose, can benefit individuals, families and the broader community. Take time to explain how community cohesion and connection protects against alcohol and other drug-related harms.

For further information see: https://community.adf.org.au/get-started/community-consultation/

Step 2: Supporting and strengthening existing programs

- LDATs can engage the target community and inform them of the benefits of current programs, promoting them and explaining how the community can access them. See section 1.1 for a list of recommended programs.

- To help facilitate this process, LDATs may also need to source expert trainers, facilitators and guest speakers from local networks or peak bodies, if appropriate and/or accessible.

- LDATs can also use the underlying principles and evidence from existing programs and adapt them to the context of their community, being mindful of ensuring the activity is suitable for your audience, the delivery setting is appropriate, and the program can be delivered safely.

Step 3: Improving amenity of local facilities and communal spaces

- Along with specific programs, LDATs can also consider some broader activities that create safe and inclusive environments, improve existing local facilities, and increase use of public spaces. All of these can build a greater sense of cohesion within a community. For example LDATs could:
  - improve facilities for young people within the community (e.g. skate parks, BMX tracks, graffiti walls and access to a range of sports)
  - engage with local faith leaders, multicultural groups and other cultural groups to develop ideas for a shared space that celebrates diversity in the community
  - work with local council to identify public spaces which can be rejuvenated.

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