

# Belonging in Geelong:

## A Social Inclusion Needs Analysis

2025



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Belonging in Geelong: A Social Inclusion Needs Analysis, 2025

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# Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which this work was conducted: the Waddawurrung People of the Kulin Nation.

We pay our deepest respects to Elders past and present and extend that respect to all First Nations peoples across the region and beyond.

We recognise the enduring wisdom, strength, and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, whose connection to Country, community, and culture has existed for tens of thousands of years.

This report speaks to the importance of belonging, inclusion, and connection, values that have always been at the heart of First Nations communities. We honour this knowledge and the role it continues to play in shaping a more connected and inclusive future for all.

# Recognition of Lived and Living Experiences

We acknowledge that some readers of this report may have lived or living experience of loneliness, social isolation, or exclusion. You may see aspects of your own story reflected in the data and insights shared here. We recognise the strength it takes to navigate these challenges and the valuable perspective that lived experience brings to shaping more inclusive communities.

This Needs Analysis represents an important step in understanding social inclusion in Greater Geelong. Insights from the recent community forum have been incorporated into this report, ensuring that the voices, experiences and ideas of local people have directly informed the findings and the actions we take together.



# Executive Summary

## Belonging is essential to health, wellbeing, and community strength.

This Social Inclusion Needs Analysis highlights the current state of inclusion in Greater Geelong, drawing on local data, community feedback, and lived experience. While the region is home to a diverse and vibrant population, many residents continue to experience loneliness, disconnection, and barriers to participation.

### Key Findings



**Certain groups are at greater risk** of loneliness and exclusion, including unpaid carers, single parents, older adults, people with disability, LGBTQIA+ communities, young people, and those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.



**Barriers** such as financial stress, limited transport, stigma, and inaccessible facilities prevent people from taking part in community life.



**Short-term programs can unintentionally deepen exclusion** if they end suddenly, which shows the need for continuity and sustainability.

## What Enables Inclusion

The report identifies program-level features that make inclusion initiatives effective and lasting:

- › Peer support reduces isolation through solidarity and shared experience.
- › Place-based approaches build on local strengths and partnerships.
- › Co-design with lived experience ensures programs reflect real needs.
- › Opportunities for authentic interaction foster trust and belonging.
- › Sustainability, accessibility and affordability remove barriers to participation.
- › Trusted community connectors play a vital role in helping people engage.

## Community Vision

Through the Geelong forum, residents imagined a city that is safe, welcoming and community-driven. They described a Greater Geelong with accessible transport, affordable and inclusive spaces, diverse festivals, and everyday opportunities to connect. People want a city that feels warm, is accepting and joyful, where housing is stable, services are reliable, and belonging is part of daily life.

## The Path Forward

The challenge of building social inclusion is complex, but the opportunity is significant. Data, community voices, and local examples all point to the same message: inclusion must be embedded in the design of programs, services, and infrastructure. The Social Inclusion Action Group and City of Greater Geelong have a central role to play in championing this vision, working alongside community to ensure strategies are sustainable, responsive, and informed by lived experience.

By combining evidence with the stories and aspirations of residents, Greater Geelong can work towards becoming a place where everyone feels they belong, has the opportunity to contribute, and can access the support and connections needed to thrive.



# Purpose & Welcome

## Humans are inherently social beings.

We thrive when we feel part of something; when we are connected to others, when we feel seen, heard, and valued. A strong sense of belonging doesn't just lift our spirits, it improves our health, strengthens communities, and helps us all lead longer, more meaningful lives.

But for many people, that sense of connection can feel out of reach.

**“In this age when the possibilities to connect are endless, more and more people are finding themselves isolated and lonely.”**

*– Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2025).*

Loneliness and exclusion are real and rising concerns across Australia, and Greater Geelong is no exception. While technology, housing growth, and new infrastructure continue to expand across our region, not everyone is experiencing these changes in the same way. For many, the threads of connection are fraying.

The good news is: community-led action can work. Research and lived experience tell us that people and communities, not just services or systems, play a vital role in reducing loneliness and increasing inclusion. This is echoed in Recommendation 15 of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, which recognises that local people and organisations are best placed to design and lead social inclusion efforts to improve mental health and wellbeing (State of Victoria, Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, 2021).

The Victorian Government has funded 10 Social Inclusion Action Groups

(SIAGs), the first 5 launched in 2022, with the second 5 beginning their journey in 2024, to strengthen social connection and inclusion at the local level (Department of Health, 2025). The City of Greater Geelong is proud to be one of the second group of 5 selected Local Government Areas, and this Needs Analysis marks the first step in a broader initiative to amplify community voices and co-design more inclusive, connected communities.

## About this Needs Analysis

At its core, a Needs Analysis is a tool that helps us better understand a problem or challenge so we can find the most effective ways to respond. It does this by exploring:

- › The current situation (what's happening now?)
- › The desired future state (what do we want to see?)
- › The gaps in between (what's missing, and what's needed?)

In this case, the focus is social inclusion and connection. What does inclusion look and feel like in Greater Geelong today, and what would it take for more people to experience it?

To answer this, we've reviewed existing data, drawn on research, and included community voices and experiences wherever possible. In August 2025, we also hosted a community forum with a diverse group of approximately 50 participants aged 15 to 80 years old, bringing together people with lived experience, carers, parents, young people, and community leaders. Their stories, insights, and hopes for the future have been woven throughout this report to ensure it reflects not only statistics, but also the realities of people's everyday lives.

We've also examined the systemic and structural barriers that can make connection harder for some groups rather than others.

We've written this document with a broad audience in mind; local government, service providers, health professionals, community organisations, and community members. We want this report to be something that sparks ideas, strengthens funding proposals, inspires new partnerships, and ultimately helps more people feel like they belong, creating a stronger, healthier community for all.

We hope it serves as both a resource and a rallying point, a starting place for shared action toward a more connected Greater Geelong.



# Understanding Social Inclusion

**Social inclusion** is about making sure everyone has the opportunity to participate fully in all parts of life, socially, economically, politically, and culturally (Hayes, Gray & Edwards, 2008).

It involves being able to engage meaningfully in community life, access services and supports and have a voice in decisions that affect you. When people are socially included, they're more likely to feel connected, valued, and like they truly belong (Australian Government Social Inclusion Board, 2010; Silver, 2010). Related ideas include participation, access to opportunities, and a sense of agency and connection (Hayes, Gray & Edwards, 2008).

**“Inclusion can also at a deeper level mean a sort of acceptance of difference, but underlying that a kind of mutual respect... like we all have this common human experience but we're all uniquely different.”**

*– Alex\* Geelong forum participant.*

In contrast, social exclusion occurs when individuals or groups are systematically denied these opportunities (Levitas et al., 2007). It refers to the marginalisation of people who, due to factors such as poverty, discrimination, location, or disability, are unable to fully engage in society. Social exclusion can lead to a lack of access to essential services, reduced life opportunities, and diminished social and emotional well-being (Khan, Combaz, & McAslan Fraser, 2015)

“Sometimes you walk into a space and just know you’re not welcome; it’s the energy.”

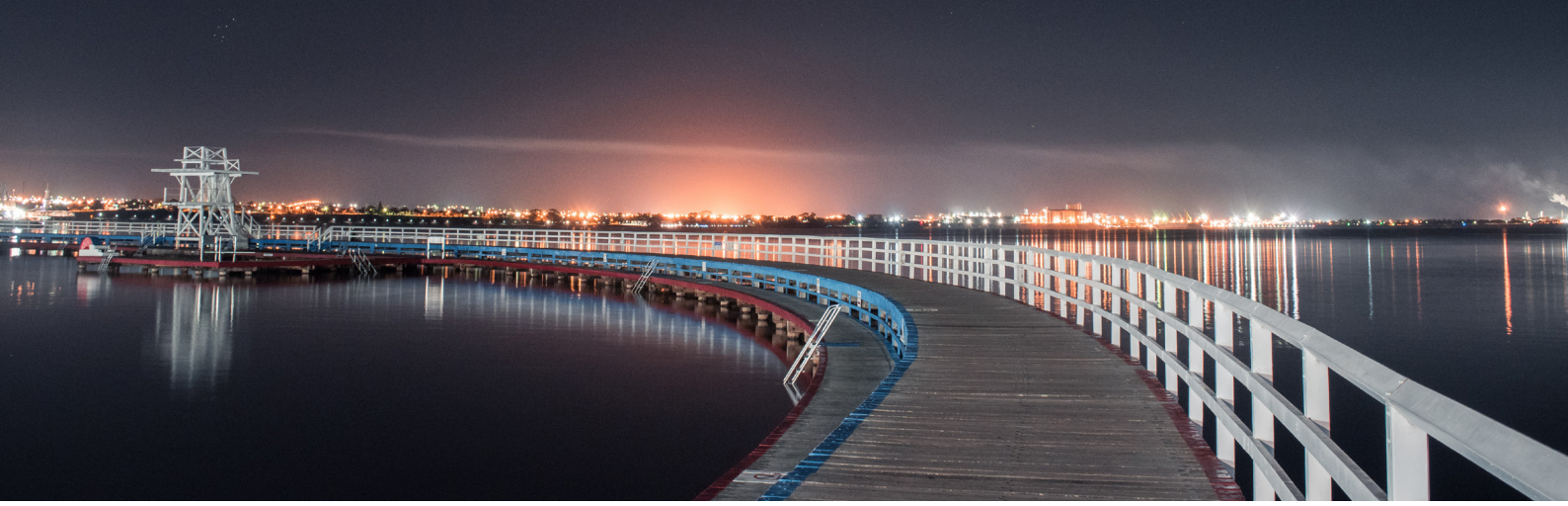
– Peter\*, Geelong forum participant.

**Loneliness** and **social isolation** are closely related to the concepts of inclusion and exclusion. Loneliness is the subjective and distressing emotional experience that arises when there is a gap between the social relationships a person desires and what they actually have (AIHW, 2025). In contrast, social isolation is the objective state of having limited or no social contact with others (AIHW, 2025). While different, both can have profound impacts on health and well-being (World Health Organization, 2025).

Research shows that 9 in 10 Australian adults experience loneliness at some point in their lives (Friends for Good, 2023). In Victoria, the most recent Victorian Population Health Survey (VPHS; 2023) found the proportion of adults who are lonely to be 23.3%. People categorised as lonely were nearly three times more likely to report poor health compared to those not classified as lonely (VPHS, 2023).

Loneliness and social isolation are significant public health issues, with health impacts comparable to well-established risk factors such as obesity and smoking (Holt-Lunstad et. al, 2015). Extensive research has shown that chronic experiences of loneliness and isolation can increase the risk of depression, anxiety, cardiovascular disease, cognitive decline, and immune dysregulation (Holt-Lunstad, 2022; Murphy, 2023; World Health Organization, 2025). These effects not only impact individual wellbeing, but also have broader implications for healthcare systems and communities.

Ensuring people feel included and connected is fundamental to the creation of healthy, resilient, and thriving communities. Social inclusion must be seen as an essential part of public policy, urban planning, and community development. By actively fostering connection, we not only improve individual lives but also strengthen the fabric of our society as a whole.



# The Local Context: Social Inclusion in Greater Geelong

**Understanding social inclusion in the City of Greater Geelong requires looking beyond the numbers to explore the lived experience of connection and participation in our community.**

This section begins with a discussion of the broad barriers that can prevent people from feeling included. Barriers that can affect individuals regardless of age, background, or ability. We then take a deeper look at specific communities that may be at greater risk of social exclusion and the particular challenges they face.

The City of Greater Geelong is a diverse and growing region, with more than 289,000 people living across over 50 suburbs and townships. It includes the busy CBD, fast-growing areas like Armstrong Creek and Mount Duneed, and the coastal, rural and suburban communities stretching across the Bellarine Peninsula and north to Anakie. Just 75 km from Melbourne, Geelong is Victoria's largest regional centre.

This mix of locations adds to the character and strength of the region, however it can also make it harder to ensure everyone feels included, connected and able to take part fully in community life.

Greater Geelong's population is not just growing, it's changing. People here come from all life stages and a wide range of cultural backgrounds. This diversity is both a real strength and a challenge. Changing demographics, socio-economic differences and uneven access to services all illustrate why inclusive planning is important. We're seeing more older adults, more single-parent families, and areas where disadvantage is significant. These trends highlight both the resilience in the community and the gaps that need to be addressed.

*See Appendix 2: Our Community – Demographic and Social Snapshot for more detail on the region's key demographic, social and economic indicators.*

# Challenges to Inclusion

## Barriers to Inclusion, Connection and Belonging

There are a range of barriers that can impact an individual's ability to feel socially included, connected, and able to participate fully in community life. These barriers can be structural, such as lack of accessible transport, limited availability of affordable housing, or inadequate service provision, or they can be social and cultural, including stigma, discrimination, or lack of representation (Patel & Patel, 2023; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2016). When these broader systemic issues are present, they can restrict individuals from engaging in work, education, volunteering, or social and recreational opportunities (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014; Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2023).

### Case Study

#### Mia: Facing Structural Barriers

Mia is a woman in her 40s who returned to Geelong to care for her ageing parents. While she has strong skills and community experience, she has repeatedly found that even well-designed facilities fail to meet the needs of people with disabilities or older residents. She described auditing a state-of-the-art community centre that complied with building codes but was still inaccessible in practice, with heavy doors, kitchens that excluded people with disabilities, and social spaces that remained empty despite being well resourced.

For Mia, transport is a particularly significant barrier. With no accessible buses running to her local area and the high cost of taxis, many older people and those with disabilities remain isolated at home. She suggested that community centres should not only provide accessible buildings but also consider how people physically get there.

"Transport is expensive. Uber's expensive. Taxi's expensive. I think transport is a huge barrier... why not have community buses attached to community hubs?"

***Mia's story illustrates how systemic gaps in transport, planning, and design compound to exclude people, even in spaces that appear inclusive.***

In addition to these societal and structural factors, individuals may face personal or situational challenges that further limit their participation. These can include poor physical or mental health, caregiving responsibilities, language or communication barriers, or experiences of trauma or marginalisation (Cabañero-Garcia et al., 2025; Eager et al., 2025). Often, multiple barriers intersect and compound over time, increasing the risk of social exclusion and its associated impacts on health and wellbeing (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003; AIHW, 2022). Addressing social inclusion, therefore, requires a multifaceted approach that tackles both the broader systems and the individual-level challenges that prevent people from feeling a sense of belonging and connection.

At the forum, participants shared the everyday realities behind structural and social barriers. Residents described how unreliable public transport, expensive parking, and poorly timed services make it difficult to stay connected. Others highlighted the impact of financial stress, from the rising cost of living to fees for children’s activities, which often excluded them from opportunities to participate. For many, digital and bureaucratic systems were also a barrier, with complex online forms or lack of internet access limiting engagement.

Equally significant were the social and cultural barriers. Participants spoke of discrimination and judgment based on disability, age, or cultural background, with one noting how “you can still feel lonely even in a crowd.” Parents of children with disability described exclusion in school and sporting settings, and some LGBTQIA+ parents described the exhaustion of repeatedly having to “come out” in parent spaces. Together, these stories show how multiple barriers can intersect, making connection and belonging harder to achieve



# Communities at Greater Risk

## **Social inclusion, and the absence of it, is not experienced equally across our community.**

While anyone can feel disconnected at times, some groups in Greater Geelong face a higher risk of exclusion due to structural barriers, social stigma, and limited access to welcoming, inclusive spaces and services.

The 2024 Geelong Preventative Health Survey measured loneliness for the first time using the internationally recognised UCLA Loneliness Scale (short form), a brief tool that asks how often people feel left out, isolated, or lacking companionship. The survey was conducted with a random selection of 2,282 Greater Geelong residents aged over 15 years. The results highlight that loneliness is a common experience: 25% of respondents reported feeling lonely, and 45% said they do not belong to any community group. Overall, the data suggests that around half of all local residents experience loneliness at least some of the time, with a smaller but significant group feeling persistently disconnected.

This section explores the key groups within Greater Geelong who are more likely to face barriers to participation and inclusion. We look at how various intersecting factors increase vulnerability to loneliness and exclusion, drawing on local data and broader research to inform our understanding. It is important to recognise that these risk factors do not exist in isolation. Many people experience intersectionality, where multiple aspects of their identity and life circumstances overlap, compounding their risk of loneliness and social exclusion. For example, a young person with a disability living in a low-income household may face far greater barriers to social connection than someone experiencing only one of these factors. Understanding and responding to the complex, layered nature of people's experiences is critical to designing inclusive and effective solutions. Equally, being part of a group identified as at greater risk does not mean an individual will inevitably experience exclusion, as personal circumstances, supports, and community connections can vary widely.

# Young People



**60%**  
18–24-year-olds  
report feeling lonely

Young adults report the highest levels of loneliness across all age groups in Greater Geelong. According to the 2024 Geelong Preventative Health Survey (GPHS), 60% of 18–24-year-olds report feeling lonely, well above the regional average of 25%. Young people were also less likely to participate in religious groups (8%) and had lower engagement in school groups unless they were parenting young children.

Loneliness among young people is strongly associated with other indicators of vulnerability. Among lonely 18–34-year-olds in Greater Geelong:



These findings mirror what national data tells us: 62% of young people report feeling left out some or all of the time, with feelings of isolation especially high among LGBTQIA+ individuals and those in regional areas (headspace, 2022). A more recent study found that 43% of Australians aged 15 to 25 experience loneliness (Ending Loneliness Together, 2025). Together, these figures highlight the urgent need for targeted initiatives that create safe, inclusive spaces where young people can connect, feel supported, and build a strong sense of belonging.

## Those Experiencing Financial Insecurity

Financial hardship is strongly linked to loneliness and social exclusion. In the 2024 Geelong Preventative Health Survey (GPHS), people classified as lonely were:

- › More than twice as likely to be unable to raise \$2,000 in two days in an emergency.
- › Three times as likely to have run out of food and been unable to afford more in the past 12 months, and almost three times as likely to have worried about running out of food.
- › Over twice as likely to be unable to call on someone in an emergency.
- › Four times more likely to feel unsafe in their neighbourhood.

**“Financial stress is one of the biggest barriers to social connection.”**

– *\*Daniel, Geelong forum participant*

Other high-risk groups included renters (39% reported feeling lonely), casual (41%) and part-time workers (20%), and those unemployed (46%). These indicators highlight the significant impact that economic instability can have on social wellbeing and people’s ability to stay connected.

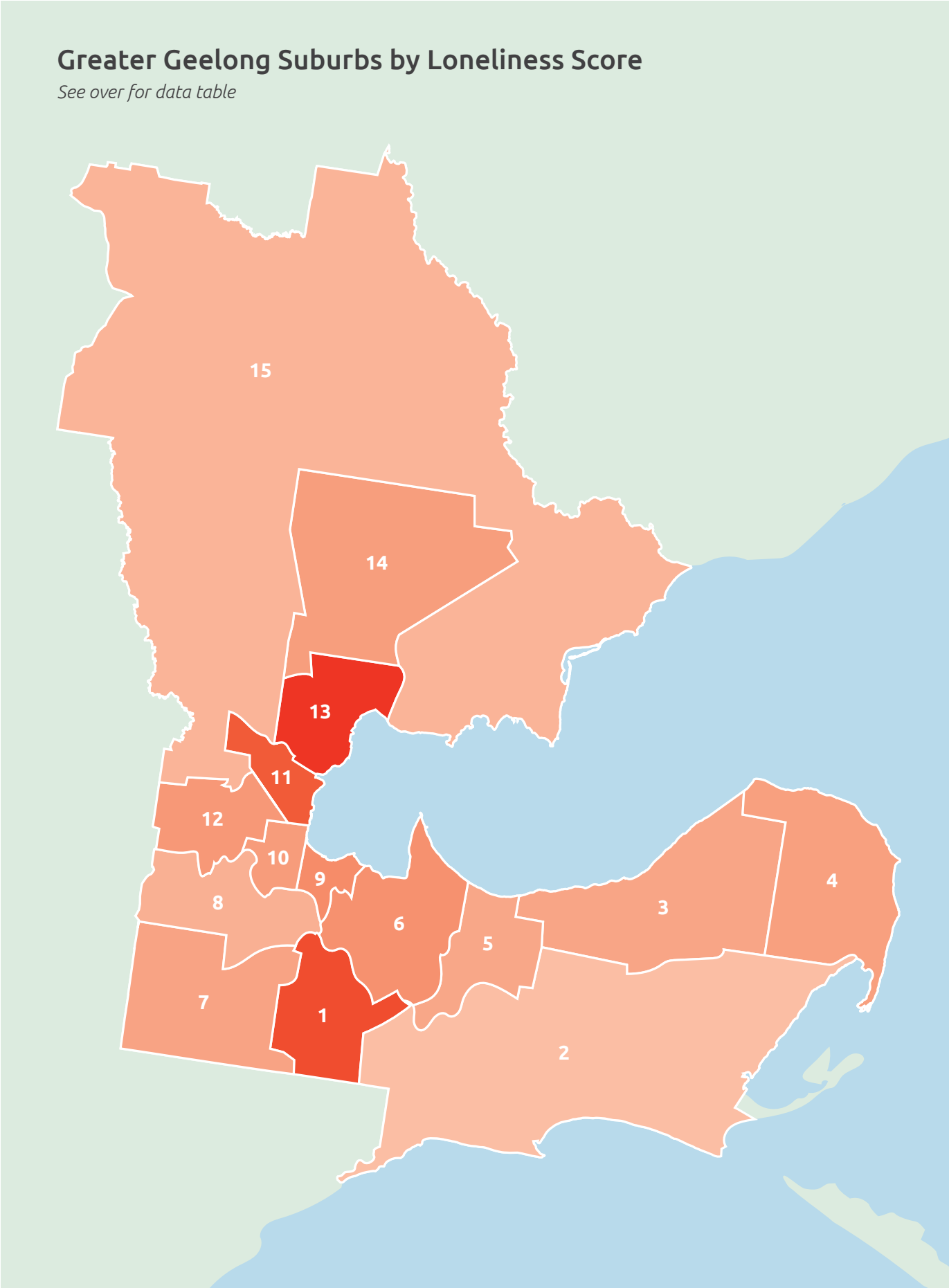
Rates of loneliness also varied considerably across Greater Geelong. The highest rates were recorded in some of the city’s most disadvantaged areas, including Corio, Norlane, and North Shore, where 46% of residents reported feeling lonely. In contrast, the lowest rates were found in Barwon Heads, Ocean Grove, and surrounding coastal communities (areas facing less disadvantage), where only 15% of residents reported loneliness. High rates (42%) were also found in new growth areas such as Armstrong Creek, Mount Duneed, Charlemont and Marshall.

This geographic divide was mirrored in community participation: suburbs with greater socio-economic disadvantage, such as Breakwater, St Albans Park, Whittington, Corio, and Norlane and surrounds, recorded particularly low involvement in community organisations, with between 60–66% of residents not belonging to any group. People in areas with higher loneliness were also more likely to feel unsafe where they live (12% vs 3% in areas with lower loneliness). The heat map below visually highlights these disparities, illustrating how loneliness differs across the municipality.

National research by Friends for Good (2019) reinforces this pattern, finding that individuals struggling to make ends meet were at greater risk of loneliness. Financial insecurity was shown to significantly reduce people’s ability to participate in community life, access services, or engage in everyday social activities.

# Greater Geelong Suburbs by Loneliness Score

See over for data table



## Greater Geelong Suburbs by Loneliness Score

ZONE	SUBURB	LONELINESS SCORE
1	Armstrong Creek, Charlemont, Marshall	42%
2	Barwon Heads, Breamlea, Connewarre, Marcus Hill, Ocean Grove, Point Lonsdale, Swan Bay, Wallington, Mannerim	15%
3	Bellarine, Clifton Springs, Curlewis, Drysdale	21%
4	Indented Head, Portarlington, St Leonards	22%
5	Leopold	20%
6	Breakwater, Moolap, Newcomb, St Albans Park, Thomson, Whittington	26%
7	Grovedale, Mount Duneed, Waurin Ponds	21%
8	Belmont, Ceres, Highton, Wandana Heights	18%
9	Drumcondra, East Geelong, Geelong South, Geelong	27%
10	Geelong West, Manifold Heights, Newtown	23%
11	Bell Park, Bell Post Hill, North Geelong, Rippleside	39%
12	Fyansford, Hamlyn Heights, Herne Hill	24%
13	Corio, Norlane, North Shore	46%
14	Lara	22%
15	Anakie, Avalon, Balliang, Batesford, Little River, Lovely Banks, Moorabool, Staughton Vale	17%

## LGBTQIA+ People

Data from the GPHS indicates LGBTQIA+ individuals in Greater Geelong experience significantly higher rates of loneliness compared to the general population. 39% of LGBTQIA+ respondents reported feeling lonely, compared to 25% of non-LGBTQIA+ people. Participation in community-based activities such as sports (15%) and religious groups (3%) was notably lower among LGBTQIA+ respondents.

However, engagement in professional or academic societies (26%) was higher, suggesting a preference for inclusive, identity-affirming spaces where people feel safe and represented.

These disparities reflect broader trends across Australia, where LGBTQIA+ people face disproportionately high rates of adverse outcomes due to stigma, prejudice, and discrimination (LGBTQIA+ Health Australia, 2021). These experiences can limit opportunities for connection and belonging, making inclusive, affirming environments essential to social and emotional wellbeing.

### Case Study

#### Eli: Seeking Safety and Understanding

Eli is a young trans person living in Grovedale who describes expressing their identity “very differently to the norm.” For Eli, this difference is a source of both pride and challenge. They spoke about how hard it can be when people do not understand what it means to live outside of conventional norms:

“I’m a person that likes expressing myself very differently to the norm... it’s just real hard sometimes, especially if people don’t know exactly what it is.”

While Eli has found some community spaces supportive, others have felt unwelcoming or even unsafe. They described feeling fearful in their own neighbourhood, worried about harassment or violence.

“I live out in Grovedale and I’m scared to go out in public... scared I’m gonna get jumped and pretty much killed.”

For Eli, inclusion is tied to something simple but profound: kindness. They shared a vision of a more compassionate Greater Geelong, where people could feel safe to be themselves without fear of judgement or harm.

“Generally just people to be a lot more kinder.”

***Eli’s story highlights the heightened risks of loneliness and exclusion faced by LGBTQIA+ young people in Greater Geelong. It also underscores the importance of creating safe, identity-affirming spaces where difference is respected, and where young people can access the connection and belonging that are vital to wellbeing.***

# People with Disability



**61%**  
People with long-term disability report feeling lonely

In Greater Geelong, people living with a long-term disability reported significantly higher rates of loneliness, with 61% experiencing loneliness compared to 23% of those without disability. This group also reported elevated levels of psychological distress (44%) and discrimination (45%), highlighting the compounding impacts of exclusion.



Broader research consistently shows that people with disability face lower rates of social participation and a greater risk of isolation. Around 1 in 4 people with disability do not leave home as often as they would like, and a similar proportion experience difficulty getting to the places they need to go (AIHW, 2024). These barriers, often stemming from inadequate infrastructure, inaccessible services, or lack of support, can limit opportunities for connection and inclusion.

In addition, people with disability may face restricted access to employment, secure housing, and financial resources, all of which influence their ability to fully participate in community life (AIHW, 2024). Ensuring that services and spaces are inclusive, accessible, and designed with lived experience at the centre is critical to improving social inclusion for people with disability.

## Older Adults

While reported rates of loneliness in Greater Geelong were lower among older adults (22% among those aged 55+ compared to 60% of those aged 18–24), this age group faces unique and compounding risks, particularly those living alone or with disability. Older adults were more likely to participate in religious groups (13%), but were less represented in professional or school-based activities. Risk factors can compound for older adults, for example, over 3% of those aged 65+ live alone, have a disability, and are on a low income; what’s often referred to as “triple jeopardy” (City of Greater Geelong, 2025).

It is important to note that while this study did not identify older adults as being among the loneliest groups in Greater Geelong, this may reflect gaps in participation rather than absence of need. Older people may have been less likely to respond to surveys and were not well represented in the community forum, suggesting that their experiences of loneliness may be underreported. In practice, older people may be at risk of significant social isolation, but their voices may not have been captured through the engagement methods used.

These patterns are consistent with national data, which show loneliness affects around 28.5% of people aged 60 and over, with the highest prevalence among those aged 75+ (Medical Journal of Australia, 2024). Loneliness is also a significant concern in residential aged care, where limited social opportunities, reduced autonomy, and loss of previous social networks can exacerbate feelings of isolation (Victor & Sullivan, 2020).

A range of factors can increase the risk of loneliness and social isolation in later life. These include major life transitions such as retirement, the death of a loved one, moving into residential aged care, and experiencing physical or cognitive decline (Stevens, Carson, & Wall, 2024). Older men who live alone are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion and may require targeted strategies to support their inclusion (Stevens, Carson, & Wall, 2024). Addressing these risks requires proactive, inclusive strategies that build on older adults’ strengths, maintain opportunities for social participation, and foster connection across all living arrangements.

# People experiencing mental ill-health

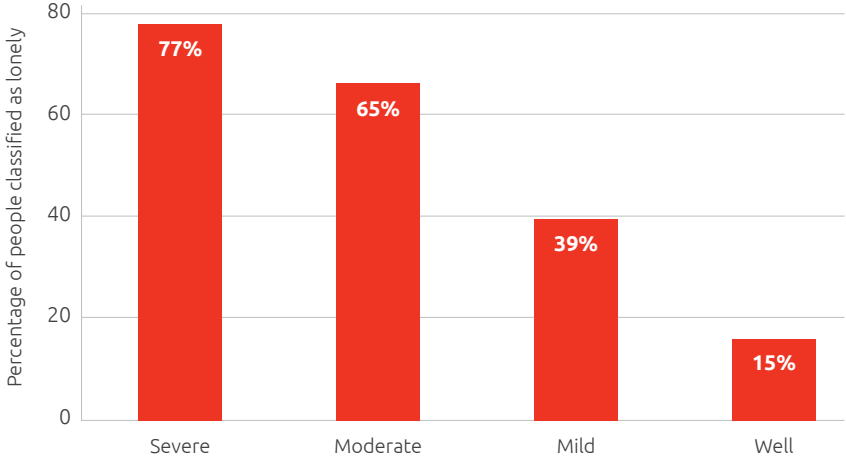


**77%**  
People with severe psychological distress report feeling lonely

In Greater Geelong, there is a strong and consistent link between psychological distress, loneliness, and reduced social inclusion. Local data shows that 77% of individuals experiencing severe psychological distress were classified as lonely. This figure gradually decreases with lower levels of distress; 65% for those with moderate distress, 39% for mild distress, and just 15% among those classified as psychologically well.

## Loneliness Rates by Psychological Distress Level

Greater Geelong (2024 GPHS)



This pattern reflects broader research showing a bi-directional relationship between mental health and social connection. Loneliness and social exclusion can contribute to conditions such as depression, anxiety, emotional distress, and suicidality, while poor mental health can, in turn, make it harder to participate in community life or maintain relationships (Park et al., 2020; Erzen & Çikrikci, 2018).

A lack of meaningful opportunities to connect, whether through friendships, community activities, or inclusive spaces, can exacerbate psychological distress, while fostering social participation can be a protective factor for mental wellbeing (Holt-Lunstad, 2024). These findings highlight the need to address loneliness and strengthen social inclusion as a public health priority, both to improve mental health outcomes and to build community resilience.

## Case Study

### Alex: Living with Mental Illness and Seeking Connection

Alex moved to Geelong from interstate a few years ago and lives with a severe mental illness that has prevented them from working throughout their adult life. Their story highlights the resilience required to navigate complex challenges as well as the barriers that can stand in the way of belonging.

Although Alex has experienced belonging in the past, finding it locally has been harder. Living in a new housing estate has felt socially isolating:

“Most people just drive into the house and drive out again. There’s a total dearth of community.”

Attempts to join groups such as men’s walking clubs or local programs have often left Alex feeling out of place, whether due to stigma around being unemployed or the overwhelming size and culture of activities. Transport has also been a major obstacle:

“If I would have come here by public transport it would have taken me about an hour and 40 minutes... by the time I got here I would have almost been shut down from just stress about the bus.”

Despite these challenges, Alex knows the value of connection. They recall how a mental health support group at university helped them to complete their degree:

“That was the only reason why I was able to finish my degree. It was really helpful... I made two good friends from that.”

Looking ahead, Alex believes Geelong needs better systems to help people find the right opportunities for inclusion:

“So many times I’ve searched for something and couldn’t find it, then later I’d hear about a program I would have gone to. If there was something really active and kept up to date, a central place with connectors helping people find the right fit, that would make such a difference.”

***Alex’s experience shows how long-term mental illness can intersect with stigma, transport difficulties, and social isolation. At the same time, it highlights how targeted support, inclusive spaces, and better pathways into community life can foster belonging and resilience.***

## Unpaid Carers and Parents

Unpaid carers (those who provide ongoing care and support to a family member or friend) are at heightened risk of loneliness and social exclusion. In Greater Geelong, 35% of unpaid carers reported feeling lonely, compared to 24% of non-carers. Recent national survey data (Carers Australia, 2023) shows that more than one-third of carers report feeling lonely often or always (38.6%), highlighting the social costs of sustained caring roles. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2023) also notes that carers face higher psychological distress than non-carers, with loneliness a common correlate of that distress.

Parents, and particularly single parents, also experience elevated levels of loneliness. In Greater Geelong, 57% of single parents were classified as lonely, and 30% reported experiencing discrimination.

**“My daughter is neurodiverse and has mental health issues, which can be isolating in the physical and psychological sense. The unpredictability of caring for her can make me retreat or reluctant to join groups.”**

*– Laura\*, Geelong forum participant.*

New research in Australia suggests almost 64% of parents experience high levels of loneliness (Liang et al., 2025). Evidence from recent Australian studies identifies caring responsibilities, financial strain, and time pressures as common barriers to social participation, particularly for parents and carers (Ending Loneliness Together, 2023; Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2021). These factors can limit opportunities to engage in community life and increase the risk of loneliness.

## Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities

People from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds face a unique set of challenges when it comes to social inclusion. In the Geelong Preventative Health Survey, 24% of respondents who speak a language other than English reported experiencing discrimination. Broader evidence indicates that CALD communities often face language barriers, lower health literacy, and unfamiliarity with service systems, which can hinder participation in community life and access to essential services (AIHW, 2023). Many individuals from CALD backgrounds are also less likely to seek help for mental health issues due to a lack of culturally appropriate services and limited awareness of available supports (Department of Health, 2020). These communities in Greater Geelong reported lower levels of participation in sporting and community groups, as well as reduced perceptions of neighbourhood safety. Such barriers, often linked to systemic exclusion, cultural disconnection, and limited access to information, can heighten the risk of loneliness and social isolation.

### Case Study

#### Priya: Recreating Cultural Belonging

Priya migrated from India nearly two decades ago and has lived in Geelong ever since. While she has had many positive experiences of welcome and inclusion, one of her biggest challenges was the absence of familiar cultural traditions.

“When my daughter was little, she didn’t even recognise what Indian culture was. She saw someone in a saree and said, ‘Look mum, Hindi people.’ I realised she had no real understanding of our culture.”

Wanting to give her child and others the chance to experience these traditions, Priya created a Facebook group for Indian parents in Geelong. What began with just three families quickly grew to more than 100. Today the group celebrates Diwali, Holi and other festivals together, sharing food, music, and connection.

“After such a long time, I enjoyed homemade Indian food with families like mine. The kids get to see it too – it’s like Christmas for us.”

***Priya’s initiative has provided an anchor for many families who were missing the comfort of cultural traditions. While she continues to feel part of Greater Geelong more broadly, creating her own community space has allowed her to maintain identity and pass it on to the next generation.***

Refugees and people seeking asylum, as a subgroup within CALD communities, are particularly vulnerable. Recent Australian research has found that these individuals experience significantly higher rates of loneliness and social isolation than population norms, with integration stressors such as discrimination, limited English proficiency, and low sense of belonging strongly linked to increased psychological distress over time (Nguyen et al., 2024; AIFS, 2023). These factors often intersect with higher rates of unemployment and financial insecurity (BMC Public Health, 2020). For many, trauma associated with displacement and resettlement further compounds these challenges, making it even more difficult to build a sense of belonging in a new community. Evidence from longitudinal studies shows that fostering neighbourhood connections and participation in community activities can significantly improve health and wellbeing outcomes for refugees (Journal of Refugee Studies, 2025), underscoring the importance of inclusive, supportive environments in the resettlement process.

## **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities**

First Nations peoples continue to face significant barriers to social inclusion in Victoria, shaped by the ongoing impacts of colonisation, systemic racism, and intergenerational trauma. Truth-telling processes such as the Yoorrook Justice Commission have documented both historical and continuing injustice, underscoring how discrimination continues to affect access to housing, education, employment, and community life (Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2025).

Material disadvantage remains acute. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are substantially over-represented in homelessness statistics, with an estimated 307 people experiencing homelessness per 10,000, around 10 times the rate for non-Indigenous Australians (ABS, 2023; AIHW, 2024). Educational and employment disparities also persist, with 72.6% of Aboriginal Victorians aged 20–24 having completed Year 12 or equivalent, compared to around 91% for non-Indigenous Australians, and lower Year 10–12 retention rates (First Peoples–State Relations, 2025).

These inequities are compounded by intergenerational trauma, including the ongoing effects of the Stolen Generations, which are linked to poorer health, social, and economic outcomes (Healing Foundation, 2021). Addressing these challenges requires culturally safe, community-led solutions that strengthen Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, promote self-determination, and invest in housing, education, and employment pathways.

It is also important to note that 20% of the Social Inclusion Investment Fund is allocated to First Nations people. Consistent with best practice, the expenditure of these funds should be determined in partnership with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to ensure alignment with community priorities and principles of self-determination.



# What Supports Inclusion

## Enablers of Inclusion, Connection and Belonging

As we have explored above, loneliness and social inclusion in Greater Geelong is not randomly distributed, it follows clear patterns tied to life stage, suburb, income, and wellbeing. The patterns revealed here should inform targeted, community-led responses. By focusing on the people and places most affected, we can begin to reweave the social fabric of Greater Geelong, with the aim that no one feels they have to navigate life alone.

### Structural Enablers

Research and practice consistently show that fostering social inclusion requires more than simply bringing people together, it involves creating the right conditions for connection, participation, and belonging. At the macro level, this includes:

- › **Embedding equity in local planning and service design**, using social equity data, inclusive engagement processes, and human rights principles across services and places (City of Greater Geelong, 2023; Victorian Government, 2021).
- › **Investing in enabling infrastructure** such as reliable transport to jobs, education, and services; accessible public spaces and community hubs; and digital inclusion measures that ensure affordable access, devices, and skills (Australian Digital Inclusion Index, 2023; Infrastructure Victoria, 2021).
- › **Expanding affordable and social housing** to stabilise lives and participation, particularly in growth areas and communities facing higher disadvantage (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2024; Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2023).

- › **Strengthening community infrastructure;** having libraries, neighbourhood houses, and cultural venues as everyday “connectors” that reduce participation barriers and support wellbeing (KPMG, 2020; State Library Victoria, 2022).
- › **Tackling discrimination and building inclusion system-wide,** with clear targets across health, education, employment, and safety, aligned with state and national frameworks for connected, supportive communities (Victorian Government, 2021; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2022).
- › **Coordinating a whole-of-community approach** means bringing together local, state, and federal government, alongside services, grassroots groups, non-profits, businesses, and residents to work toward a shared agenda. This aligns with national recommendations for a coordinated strategy to reduce loneliness and social isolation, ensuring that every sector plays a role in building connection and belonging. (Ending Loneliness Together, 2020).

These system enablers provide the foundation on which effective local programs can be built. Without them, even the most well-designed initiatives risk being undermined by structural barriers that limit access and engagement. With them, we can create an environment where targeted interventions are more likely to thrive. The following section explores program-level elements in more detail, drawing on evidence from both local practice and broader research.

## Program-Level Enablers

These are the design and delivery features that make social inclusion initiatives meaningful, effective, and sustainable. They highlight what helps programs move beyond short-term activity to create real and lasting impact.

It is important to note that not every program needs to include every enabler. They are not a checklist, but rather a set of elements that have been consistently identified in successful initiatives. Each program will draw on the enablers that best fit its purpose, community, and context.

To bring these concepts to life, this section includes case studies and examples from Greater Geelong where these enablers are already being used in practice. These local stories demonstrate how principles such as peer support, co-design, place-based approaches and sustainability can be translated into action, creating spaces where people feel welcome, connected and valued.

**Peer support** creates solidarity, empathy, and non-judgemental understanding among people with similar experiences, reducing isolation and enhancing wellbeing, without the need for professional intervention (UNSW Sydney, 2021; Cooper et al., 2024).

### Case Study Example – Right Mate and The Man Walk

*The Man Walk* – Geelong began in 2019 and has since become a regular Saturday morning fixture. Each week at 8am, a group of men meets outside the same café and heads off for a one-hour walk along the waterfront. The simple act of walking side by side has created space for routine, connection, and open conversation.

As co-founder Luke Outerbridge explains:

“What started as a walk quickly became something much more. It showed us how important it is to create spaces where men feel comfortable to talk, connect, and just show up for one another.”

That same year, Luke also co-founded *Right Mate*, an initiative focused on improving mental health awareness and inclusion for men. Right Mate has built a website of accessible resources, delivered presentations to local schools and organisations, and created welcoming spaces through events like golf days, lawn bowls sessions, and monthly dinners at local venues. Each activity is designed to bring men together in supportive, stigma-free ways.

Together, these initiatives demonstrate how peer-led approaches can break down stigma and create safe, meaningful opportunities for men to connect.

**Place-based approaches** tailor programs to the unique needs, strengths, and demographics of a community, often through strong local partnerships and building on existing assets (Victorian Government, 2020; Our Place, 2023).

### Case Study Example – Whittington Neighbourhood House

Whittington Neighbourhood House is a welcoming space where people of all ages and backgrounds can connect, learn, and feel part of something bigger. Programs, activities, and support encourage friendships, skill-building, and a strong sense of belonging in Greater Geelong’s east.

As Manager Chantelle Hodgson explains:

“Many people come through our doors seeking connection and leave with new friends, confidence, and community ties.”

By offering programs and activities close to home, Neighbourhood Houses like Whittington foster everyday connection and reduce barriers of transport and cost.

**Co-design with lived experience** ensures that programs are shaped by the people they are intended to serve, prioritising meaningful involvement and shared decision-making from the outset (McKercher et al., 2024; Centre for Universal Design Australia, 2025).

#### **Case Study Example – Grovedale Toy Library**

The Grovedale Toy Library worked with local families, including parents of children with disabilities, and professionals such as OTs and speech pathologists, to co-design new supported borrowing sessions. Families identified barriers such as timing, accessibility, and sensory overload, which informed the initial program design. Importantly, the co-design process has not stopped there. The Toy Library continues to invite feedback during sessions, making ongoing adjustments in response to families' experiences. This iterative approach ensures that the program remains responsive, inclusive, and relevant to the community it serves.

**Opportunities for meaningful interaction** create spaces for authentic connection and vulnerability, moving beyond surface-level encounters to foster belonging (Social Policy Group, 2023).

#### **Case Study Example – The Empowerment Challenge**

The Empowerment Challenge provides younger mums with a safe space to feel empowered, connected, respected, and valued. The program focuses on creating opportunities for organic connections and peer support, where relationships develop naturally and provide a foundation of trust.

As Program Manager Laura Kingston explained:

“Our groups foster the development of organic connections, support networks and new friends. New friends that notice when you aren't there. The voices that help you recognise that you deserve better. You are worthy. Together our mums have built each other up and they've pulled each other out of some dark and dangerous places. They have helped each other believe.”

The impact of this work goes beyond individual mums, extending to their children and the generations that follow, breaking cycles of isolation and disadvantage through connection and shared strength.

**Sustainability and continuity** embed programs in communities over the long term, ensuring consistent engagement and support rather than short-term, one-off activities (Our Community, 2022). As one forum participant explained:

**“Short-term programs can do more harm than good when they suddenly end.”**

#### **Case Study Example – The Power in You Project**

*The Power in You Project* is an open-ended day program that takes a person-centred approach to supporting community members who may be experiencing disadvantage, isolation, or recovery challenges. The program provides a welcoming and inclusive environment where participants can build confidence, skills, and social connections at their own pace.

A key strength of *The Power in You Project* is the breadth of its activities, which are designed to promote wellbeing, creativity, and belonging. Participants can take part in art classes, gym sessions, peer support groups, cooking programs, and other practical and social activities that encourage connection and self-expression. Peer support and community connection are embedded throughout the program, ensuring that participants are not only supported individually but also have opportunities to form meaningful relationships and contribute to their community.

*The Power in You Project* is a sustainable initiative that continues to grow and strengthen as it becomes more deeply embedded in the local community. Its consistent presence and collaborative approach have made it a trusted and valued part of Greater Geelong’s social inclusion landscape.

**Shared interests and common goals**, whether creative, recreational, or skill-based, provide a natural foundation for relationships, helping participants find purpose and identity within a group (VicHealth, 2020).

#### **Case Study Example – Ukes’n’more**

*Ukes’n’more* is a community ukulele and singing group that has been meeting weekly at Grovedale Neighbourhood House for the past ten years. Known for being light-hearted and welcoming, the group focuses on connection, fun, and the joy of making music together.

As group leader Ross Hobbs shares:

“We’re not pretentious or too serious — we strive to have fun while engaging the grey matter. Our evenings always end with supper and a chance to chat with friends. Coming together to sing and play uke relaxes us in so many ways. It presses pause on life’s stresses and helps us realise that sometimes the things that trouble us don’t even matter.”

Through music, conversation, and laughter, Ukes'n'more creates simple but powerful opportunities for people to connect and feel part of a community.

**Intergenerational engagement** builds understanding, reduces stereotypes, and fosters lasting connections across age groups, with evidence of improved wellbeing and inclusion for all participants (AIFS, 2019; Playgroup Australia, 2023). Forum participants highlighted this as a local need:

“I’d love intergenerational opportunities... I think more opportunities for that intergenerational connection is really important.”

**Accessibility and affordability** ensure programs are free or low-cost, physically accessible, and inclusive of diverse needs, reducing financial and logistical barriers to participation (Victorian Government, 2021). A forum participant described how even small costs can be a barrier:

“If you’re already worrying about bills, you’re not going to join a program that costs money.”

**Leveraging local knowledge** and experience draws on the expertise of community leaders and people with lived experience, enhancing relevance, cultural safety, and sustainability (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2021). Participants described the importance of trusted connectors:

“Sometimes it’s about someone saying, ‘Come along with me.’ Otherwise you just wouldn’t go.”

As described, there are clear features that make social inclusion programs successful and sustainable.

Peer support, place-based approaches, co-design, authentic interaction, continuity, and accessibility all contribute to creating spaces where people feel safe, connected, and valued.

Embedding these features into planning and delivery may strengthen the impact of programs, reduce the risk of exclusion, and ensure that efforts to build connection in Greater Geelong are lasting and meaningful.

## Local Strengths and Successes

It is essential to take a strengths-based approach when addressing social inclusion. While it's important to recognise that certain individuals and groups may face increased risks of loneliness and exclusion, it is equally important to acknowledge the skills, knowledge, and resilience they bring. Every person, group, and community holds a wealth of lived experience and potential that can contribute to stronger, more connected neighbourhoods (VicHealth, 2020; Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2021).

Within the City of Greater Geelong, there are many inspiring initiatives already making a difference. These grassroots programs are often locally driven and emerge in direct response to identified community needs. From neighbourhood gatherings to intergenerational playgroups, culturally inclusive support groups, peer-led mental health initiatives, and creative arts-based projects, these programs foster a genuine sense of belonging.

What makes these efforts so powerful is their ability to create welcoming spaces where people feel seen, valued, and connected. They are often built on existing community strengths; relationships, shared histories, and place-based knowledge, and demonstrate the impact that community-led action can have in reducing isolation and enhancing social inclusion. Evidence shows that when these initiatives are supported through adequate resources, capacity building, and partnerships with local organisations, their reach and sustainability are significantly increased (Victorian Government, 2021; KPMG, 2020). Recognising, resourcing, and celebrating these initiatives is key to building a more connected and inclusive Greater Geelong.

The forum shone a light on many positive initiatives already underway in Greater Geelong. People spoke warmly of grassroots groups and activities that create a sense of belonging, from book exchanges and community gardens to multicultural festivals and sports events. These local strengths demonstrate that when spaces are welcoming, affordable, and community-driven, people feel seen and supported.

One participant described how being part of a peer-led group provided both solidarity and fun, saying it was a place where "you are noticed when you are not there." Others celebrated the role of neighbourhood events and craft or music groups in providing routine, friendship, and joy. These examples highlight the community's own capacity to generate connection when the right support and recognition are in place.



# A Future Vision for Greater Geelong

## **We asked participants at the forum to imagine a future of social inclusion for Greater Geelong.**

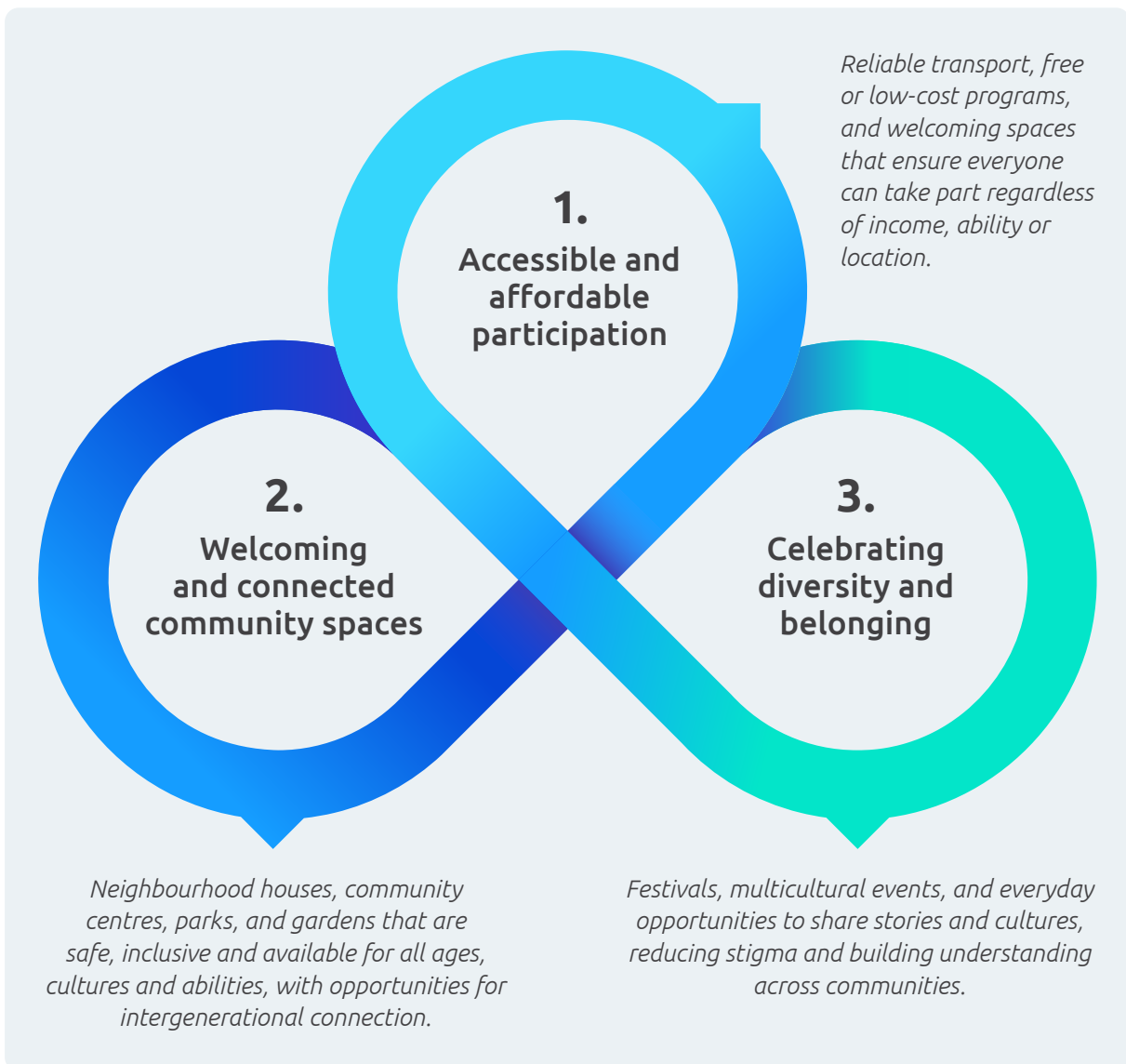
Working in small groups, they painted a vision of a city where connection and belonging are part of everyday life.

In this vision, community spaces are open, affordable and welcoming, designed so that people of all ages and abilities can take part. Transport is reliable and accessible, linking neighbourhoods to central hubs and natural spaces, ensuring no one is left isolated. Events and activities are visible and easy to find, through shared calendars, community directories, and even neighbours lending a hand to guide each other into groups and services.

Future Geelong is a city powered by people. Streets come alive with neighbourhood picnics and street parties. Community centres hum with low-cost programs and shared learning. Young people connect with nature in reserves and parks, while multicultural festivals fill the city with colour, flavour and music. Real support exists for every stage of life, from buddy systems for newcomers, life skills workshops, to affordable and accessible mental health services, ensuring no one falls through the cracks.

This future is also about place and belonging. Housing is stable, public spaces are green and thriving, and people share skills, stories and cultures across generations. Inclusion is visible everywhere, from playgrounds designed for all abilities, to community gardens that bring together young and old.

From the community's vision, several consistent priorities emerged that show what is most needed to build a more inclusive and connected Greater Geelong:



Future Geelong feels safe, warm and inviting. It's a city where people know each other, where neighbours look out for one another, and where connection is celebrated. It's vibrant, joyful and deeply human, a place where everyone belongs.



## Conclusion & Path Forward

**This Needs Analysis illustrates that social inclusion is central to health, wellbeing, and community strength in Greater Geelong.**

Data highlights the groups most at risk of loneliness and exclusion, while community voices bring to life the barriers and challenges that make connection harder for many. At the same time, the report has highlighted the resilience, creativity, and commitment already present in our region, from grassroots initiatives to neighbourhood gatherings, cultural celebrations, and peer-led support.

The stories and insights gathered through the forum provide a compelling vision of what Greater Geelong could become. Residents described a city where people feel safe, connected, and welcome; where affordable and accessible spaces and transport make participation possible; and where systems are harmonised so that inclusion is simple and natural. This vision is not only aspirational, but also practical, rooted in the ideas and lived experiences of local people.

## Recommendations:

### 1. Invest in sustainable, long-term initiatives

Provide ongoing support and funding for programs that strengthen connection and belonging, avoiding short-term or one-off activities that risk leaving people further isolated.

### 2. Strengthen communication and accessibility

Develop centralised, consistent ways for residents to find out what is happening in their community, supported by accessible formats, digital tools, and trusted community connectors.

### 3. Embed co-design and lived experience

Ensure the voices of residents, especially those at greater risk of exclusion, are central to program design, delivery, and evaluation.

### 4. Expand inclusive and welcoming spaces

Prioritise investment in community centres, parks, neighbourhood houses, and other local facilities that are affordable, safe, and accessible for all. Funding should also support free and low-cost programs and activities so that financial barriers do not prevent participation.

### 5. Celebrate diversity and build belonging

Support initiatives that bring people together across cultures, generations, and life stages, including festivals, shared activities, and intergenerational programs.

### 6. Prioritise groups at greater risk of exclusion

Ensure that policies, funding, and program design intentionally address the needs of communities most affected by loneliness and disconnection. This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, carers, single parents, older adults, people with disability, those experiencing mental health challenges, LGBTQIA+ communities, young people, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, new arrivals, and people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage or financial stress.

Moving forward, the Social Inclusion Action Group and City of Greater Geelong have an opportunity to build on this work. Addressing social inclusion will require long-term commitment, collaboration across sectors, and a willingness to work alongside communities as equal partners. The path ahead involves strengthening what is already working, removing systemic barriers, and investing in the conditions that allow belonging to flourish.

**The challenge is significant, but so too is the opportunity.**

By combining evidence with lived experience, and by acting together, we can shape a Greater Geelong where everyone has the chance to belong, to contribute, and to thrive. A Geelong where connection is part of daily life, and where the strength of our community is defined by the way we include, support, and uplift one another.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Needs Analysis Methodology

To inform this Needs Analysis, a comprehensive desktop review was undertaken using both region-specific and broader data sources. A key resource was the Geelong Preventative Health Study, particularly its findings on loneliness and community participation.

Recognising the complexity of social inclusion, we explored a wide range of factors that influence people's ability to connect, participate, and belong. However, not every aspect of this broad and multifaceted topic has been included here. This was a deliberate choice to keep the document concise, accessible, and easy to navigate. This report is not intended to provide an exhaustive account of all available evidence, but rather to offer a snapshot of what is currently happening in our community.

In August 2025, Friends for Good and the City of Greater Geelong jointly hosted a facilitated community forum to gather direct input from residents. The forum included interactive activities and invited people to share their ideas and feedback in a variety of ways, including audio recordings, written reflections, drawings, and group discussions. This inclusive approach ensured that people could contribute in the way that felt most comfortable for them and captured a wide range of perspectives and experiences.

### **Use of community stories:**

A number of personal stories were shared through the forum and other channels. Not every story is included in this report. Instead, selected stories have been highlighted where they help to illustrate themes or perspectives. This approach ensures that lived experience remains central, while keeping the document focused and accessible.

### **Scope and limitations:**

- › This report draws primarily on publicly available data and community contributions gathered through the forum.
- › While efforts were made to include diverse perspectives, participation was voluntary and therefore may not fully capture the experiences of all groups within the community.
- › Findings represent a snapshot in time and should be read with awareness of changing social, demographic, and policy contexts.

By combining quantitative evidence with qualitative insights, this Needs Analysis aims to reflect not only what the data shows, but also how local people describe their lived experiences of inclusion, belonging, and connection.

## Appendix 2: Understanding Our Community – Demographic and Social Snapshot

Greater Geelong's population is both growing and changing. Our region is home to people across all stages of life, with diversity in age, background, and experience among its greatest strengths. These changing demographics highlight the importance of inclusive planning to meet evolving needs.

### Age Profile

Young people aged 15–24 make up around 12% of the City of Greater Geelong's population, representing more than 32,000 residents (ABS, 2021). This number is projected to grow significantly, increasing by more than 50% between 2016 and 2041 (ABS, 2021), highlighting the importance of creating inclusive and connected opportunities for this growing age group.

Older adults make up a growing share of the community. Currently, 25.6% of residents are aged over 60 (compared with 22.4% across Victoria), and 31.5% are aged 55 and over. By 2041, much of the region's population growth is projected to occur among people aged 70 and over. Parents and homebuilders (aged 35–49) are currently the largest age group in Greater Geelong.

### Families and Children

Families with young children continue to shape the region, and the birth rate is rising. Greater Geelong has a higher proportion of single-parent families with young children (21.7%) than the Victorian average (18.2%).

### Cultural Diversity

#### *First Nations peoples*

Greater Geelong is home to 3,562 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (1.3% of the population), a higher proportion than Greater Melbourne (0.7%) (ABS, 2021). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a deep and ongoing connection to the land and community in the region. Historical government policies and practices have contributed to intergenerational disadvantage, including impacts on health, education, employment, and social and emotional wellbeing.

#### *Culturally and linguistically diverse communities*

Greater Geelong is culturally diverse, with 17.7% of residents born overseas and 11.7% speaking a language other than English at home (ABS, 2021). Many recent migrants have arrived from India. Between 2017 and 2022, there were 1,207 humanitarian arrivals to Greater Geelong, with the top countries of origin being Iraq (276), Afghanistan (248), Myanmar (244) and Syria (223) (Cultura, 2022). As of March 2022, 2.5% of all asylum seekers in Victoria who arrived by boat were residing in Greater Geelong (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2022). Refugee and asylum seeker communities may face complex challenges related to settlement, language, trauma, and social inclusion.

### **Socio-Economic Disadvantage**

The SEIFA Index of Disadvantage shows significant variation across Greater Geelong — from 1096.4 in Barwon Heads to 764.3 in Norlane–North Shore. Suburbs such as Norlane, Corio, Whittington, Newcomb, and Breakwater experience significantly higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage, ranking among the most disadvantaged in Victoria.

### **Disability and Caregiving**

More than one in five residents (22.1%) live with a disability, and 13.5% of adults provide unpaid care to a family member or friend due to disability, old age, or long-term illness. This reflects the growing importance of informal caregiving within the community.

### **Digital Access**

Greater Geelong’s Digital Inclusion Index score is 73.0, aligning with Victorian and national averages. However, 15.8% of households do not have internet access at home, impacting opportunities for education, work, and social connection.

### **Education**

Just over half (53.2%) of residents aged 15 years and over have completed Year 12, which is lower than the Victorian average. While tertiary education attainment is rising, early school leaving remains a challenge in parts of the region.

### **Employment and Income**

As of June 2023, Greater Geelong’s unemployment rate was 3.2%, though underemployment and low wages remain concerns. Nearly half of women (46.3%) earn below the minimum weekly wage, compared with 32.6% of men.

### **Access to Healthcare**

Almost one in five adults (18.6%) reported being unable to see a GP when needed in the past year, most often due to cost, transport barriers, or limited availability of appointments.

These figures demonstrate both the diversity and resilience of Greater Geelong’s residents, as well as the challenges that many face in daily life. They also underscore the need for responsive, inclusive planning to ensure that all community members can thrive.

**Source:** City of Greater Geelong, *Community Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2025–2029 – Final Draft*; Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021 Census); profile.id community data.

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