

BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITIES

Evaluating the Social Outcomes of the Supporting Stronger Communities Grant Program

RESEARCH REPORT | SEPTEMBER 2026

Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association
Helen Macpherson Smith Trust
DEAKIN UNIVERSITY
DEAKIN HOME RESEARCH CENTRE

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We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the respective lands on which this research was conducted. We recognise that First Nations communities hold deep and ongoing connections to the lands, waterways, and skies in the many localities across Australia where our research participants live and work. We pay our respects to past and present Elders of these communities, and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who took part in or may be impacted by this work.

This research was undertaken by HOME Research Centre at Deakin University.

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RESEARCH PARTNERS

This research was conducted by the HOME Research Centre at Deakin University, in partnership with the Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association (ANHCA). The project was supported by funding from the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust.

Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association

The Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association (ANHCA) is the national peak body representing over 1000 Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres (NH&Cs) across Australia.

Working in partnership with six state-level peak bodies, ANHCA sets national standards for value, guidance, and leadership within the NH&C sector. Along with leadership and advocacy, ANHCA also operates a public fund that enables individual centres to apply for philanthropic grants.

HOME Research Centre

HOME Research Centre was founded in 2018 to tackle the complex and interlinked challenges of affordable housing, homelessness, and social inclusion. Based at Deakin University, HOME draws on diverse interdisciplinary expertise from design, health, policy, arts and education, business and law, social science, and lived experience to lead research that is both academically rigorous and community grounded.

We work in close partnership with local communities, government, service providers, and industry to co-create knowledge and solutions. HOME researchers apply systems thinking and participatory processes to better understand the structural forces shaping community disadvantage and develop coordinated, effective, and equitable responses.

Helen Macpherson Smith Trust

The Helen Macpherson Smith Trust (HMST) is an independent philanthropic organisation working to advance initiatives that build capability, foster meaningful connections, and support long-term community sustainability. As a key pillar of its work, HMST supports initiatives that strengthen the capacity of community organisations through targeted capability-building activities, cross-organisational collaboration, and enabling pathways for community voice and co-design.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PROJECT AIMS

This research evaluates whether the Supporting Stronger Communities (SSC) Grant Program is achieving its intended social outcomes: strengthening sense of belonging, sense of community, social connectedness, and social capital.

Rather than evaluating individual local programs, the study assessed the broader impacts of the SSC Grant Program across a diverse set of funded Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres. It seeks to understand how small-scale, place-based programs contribute to stronger and more connected communities, and how these impacts vary across different groups, communities, and contexts.

The study was guided by four related aims:

1. Assess whether SSC-funded programs are contributing to improved sense of belonging, social connectedness, sense of community, and social capital among program members.
2. Understand what these outcomes look like in practice for communities, including how people describe connection, belonging, support, participation, and community ties.
3. Identify how the SSC Grant Program assists in producing these outcomes, including the program features, delivery conditions, and local partnerships that enable positive change.
4. Identify gaps, barriers, and opportunities to strengthen future grant rounds, program delivery, and evaluation.

The evaluation sought to generate practical evidence for funders, partners, and Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres about the social value of SSC-funded programs and the conditions that help them build stronger, more inclusive, and better-connected communities.

METHODOLOGY

This evaluation focused on SSC-funded programs from two consecutive funding rounds: April 2025 (Cohort A) and September 2025 (Cohort B). These programs were delivered through local Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres located across Australia.

Two main participant groups were recruited: program members, meaning people attending local SSC-funded programs; and program managers, meaning senior staff or coordinators responsible for running these programs. Select other stakeholders, including facilitators, partner organisations, and sector representatives also contributed to the study's workshop phase.

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach, drawing on data collected through three channels:

- surveys completed by 16 program managers and 160 program members
- semi-structured interviews with 7 program managers
- two collaborative workshops involving program managers and local stakeholders from 16 organisations.

Together, these methods enabled the research team to capture both quantitative participant data and richer qualitative insights into program experiences, delivery, local context, barriers, enablers, and opportunities for future improvement.

KEY FINDINGS

This evaluation finds that SSC-funded programs are contributing to the Grant Program's intended social outcomes, with the clearest evidence relating to social connectedness. There is also strong evidence that funded programs support and reinforce sense of belonging and sense of community. The evidence of social capital formation is more indicative, reflecting new relationships, trust, reciprocity, information exchange, participation, and links to wider services and opportunities.

Overall, program members reported high levels of belonging and community connectedness throughout the study. The quantitative measures did not show a statistically reliable increase between earlier and later survey stages. However, the evaluation could not measure true pre/post-program change because most participants had already been involved in programs before their first survey, survey respondents differed between rounds, and initial scores were already very high. The qualitative and perceived-benefit evidence was considerably clearer: among later-stage respondents, 89% reported gaining new information or knowledge, 81% accessed useful resources, and 83% made new social connections through program participation.

Across different program types, positive outcomes were associated less with particular program activities than with *how* programs were delivered. Important characteristics included a welcoming and non-judgemental environment; skilled and trusted facilitators; repeated opportunities for interaction; peer relationships; practical usefulness; opportunities for participants to contribute; responsiveness to local needs; and flexibility in delivery. Practical, educational, cultural, or material benefits frequently manifested alongside social benefits, with each reinforcing the other.

Outcomes were not uniform. Some participants continued to experience substantial isolation or exclusion, particularly where programs were working with people facing significant disadvantage or disruption. For these participants, early outcomes such as regular attendance, trusting a facilitator, making one new connection, or feeling comfortable seeking support may represent meaningful progress, even where broader community-belonging scores remained unchanged.

Systems analysis further showed that program outcomes depend on the conditions surrounding local delivery. Funding and program continuity, staff capacity, grant flexibility, organisational trust, and community responsiveness were particularly influential. Short funding cycles, administrative burden, insufficient recognition of delivery costs, and stretched workforce capacity can limit the essential relational work through which belonging and connection are developed.

CONCLUSIONS

The evaluation supports the value of the SSC Grant Program as a mechanism for enabling locally grounded organisations to strengthen social relationships and community connectedness. The Grant Program's contribution is not simply that it funds activities. Rather, it enables Neighbourhood Houses and Centres to create accessible, welcoming settings in which people can meet repeatedly, build trust, exchange support, develop skills, access resources, and gradually establish a stronger sense of belonging, connection, and community.

A central finding is that relationships are both an outcome of SSC-funded programs and a mechanism through which other social outcomes are achieved. A useful or meaningful activity can provide the initial reason to participate, but repeated interaction, familiarity, and trust are what allow friendship, reciprocity, belonging, and wider connections to develop. This helps explain why very different kinds of programs can generate similar social benefits.

The evaluation also highlights the importance of the existing community infrastructure on which SSC builds. Relatively modest grants can generate significant value because funded organisations bring established local knowledge, trusted relationships, skilled staff and volunteers, welcoming facilities, and community networks. Protecting this capacity is thus important to the funding model's effectiveness.

The findings do not suggest that all funded programs produce the same outcomes, that one activity type outperforms another, or that benefits necessarily persist beyond delivery. The central conclusion is that the SSC Grant Program creates and strengthens the conditions for belonging, connection, and community to develop. Sustaining these outcomes requires considering not only what is funded, but also continuity, flexibility, workforce capacity, and how program success is understood and evaluated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The detailed Recommendations in Section 5 can be summarised into six priorities:

1. **Support continuity for effective programs.** Create clearer pathways for successful programs to continue, with opportunities for repeat or longer-term funding where sustained relationships are central to achieving outcomes.
2. **Match funding more closely to the work required.** Consider different grant levels and recognise full program delivery costs, including skilled staff and facilitators, coordination, participant follow-up, volunteer support, overheads, and vital relational work.
3. **Retain program flexibility and accessibility.** Allow programs to adapt to emerging local needs and keep application, reporting, and acquittal requirements proportionate to grant size and organisational capacity.
4. **Prioritise characteristics of effective delivery, rather than specific activity types.** Continue to support programs that are accessible, locally responsive, useful, welcoming, participatory, relationship-focused, and able to create repeated opportunities for meaningful interaction and contribution.
5. **Strengthen sector coordination and learning.** Use ANHCA and state and territory peak bodies to share learning, support grant recipients, connect organisations facing similar challenges, and strengthen feedback between communities, the sector, and funders.
6. **Adopt proportionate, learning-focused evaluation.** Establish a common, concise program-outcomes framework supported by mixed-method evidence. Encourage programs to identify challenges, adaptations, and unintended outcomes without fear that candid reporting may disadvantage future funding applications. If assessing change over time is required, design and fund a dedicated longitudinal evaluation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Community-based organisations in Australia play a vital role in addressing social and economic challenges. Embedded in local communities and delivering diverse services, these organisations are also important sites of knowledge and innovation. However, resource constraints often limit their capacity to capture, document, and share this valuable knowledge (Verma et al., 2025).

Program evaluations are a useful tool for assessing the impacts of community-focused initiatives. By capturing key program insights – including participant outcomes, community benefits, barriers, and areas for improvement – a robust evaluation provides an evidence base to enhance program delivery, inform future funding, and demonstrate program value (AES, 2023: 13).

1.1 PROJECT BACKGROUND

This study evaluates the social outcomes of the Supporting Stronger Communities (SSC) Grant Program. The evaluation looks at social impact through the lens of four key concepts:

- Sense of belonging
- Social connectedness
- Sense of community
- Social capital

These four concepts are closely related, but each brings a different lens to the evaluation. Definitions for each concept are provided in Section 1.5, below (see p.8).

The SSC Grant Program

The SSC Grant Program provides one-off grants of up to $10,000 for local Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres (NH&Cs) to run programs that promote equality, inclusion, wellbeing, and social and/or economic participation.

Delivered nationally by the Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association (ANHCA), the SSC Grant Program targets metropolitan and larger regional centres, with a focus on meeting emerging needs in local communities. It is supported by the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust and the Sidney Myer Fund.

Since 2019, more than 150 Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres have received SSC grants to deliver a diverse range of local initiatives. Funding has supported programs addressing food security, social connection, health and wellbeing, financial literacy, family violence, employment skills, community-building, education and learning, material aid, and access to local support services.

Reflecting the SSC Grant Program's focus on equality and inclusion, funded initiatives typically target people who face structural or systemic disadvantage, including financial, social, or health-related challenges.

1.2 STUDY AIMS AND RATIONALE

This evaluation responds to growing interest in the role of local, place-based programs in strengthening belonging, social connection, community participation, and social capital.

In Australia and internationally, community-based programs are increasingly recognised as important social infrastructure: they provide opportunities for people to meet, participate, learn, access support, and build relationships in settings that are local, familiar, and relatively low-barrier.

At the same time, there is a continuing need to better evidence the outcomes of community-building initiatives. Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres often hold deep knowledge about

local communities and deliver programs that are highly responsive to local need. However, small community organisations may have limited time, resources, or evaluation infrastructure to document the social impacts of their work in a consistent way. This can make it difficult to demonstrate program value, assess outcomes across settings, or identify which program features and delivery conditions are most effective.

The Supporting Stronger Communities (SSC) Grant Program provides a valuable opportunity to address this evidence gap. Because the Grant Program funds a wide array of initiatives across diverse and geographically disparate communities, this allows the evaluation to examine how small-scale, place-based programs contribute to broader social outcomes across multiple localities and contexts.

This study does not seek to evaluate each local SSC-funded program as a separate, stand-alone intervention. Rather, the evaluation focuses on the social impacts of the SSC Grant Program itself. Individual local programs provide the evidence base through which broader patterns can be identified, but the study's central concern is whether and how the overarching Grant Program is supporting sense of belonging, social connection, sense of community, and social capital across participating Neighbourhood Houses and Centres around Australia.

The evaluation was designed to generate practical evidence for funders, program partners, and community organisations. It aims to identify what kinds of outcomes are emerging, how these outcomes are experienced by program members and observed by program managers, what enables or constrains program success, and what gaps or opportunities should inform future SSC funding rounds. In doing so, the study contributes to knowledge about both effective program delivery and the wider evidence base on the value of place-based community-building initiatives.

1.3 STUDY CONTEXT

Role of Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres

Established in the 1970s, Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres (NH&Cs) are recognised as important and trusted institutions for local communities around Australia. Over 1000 Neighbourhood Houses now operate nationally, providing valuable social infrastructure for communities in every state and territory.

Following a place-based community development model, Neighbourhood Houses and Centres create opportunities for residents to connect, access resources, and take part in shared activities. They offer varied programs tailored to local contexts, ranging from arts workshops and exercise sessions to playgroups, adult education programs, community gardens, and initiatives connecting vulnerable and disadvantaged residents with local services.

Australians see Neighbourhood Houses as safe and welcoming community sites (Harrison et al., 2020; NHV, 2025), a perception that reflects these organisations' longstanding focus on fostering social inclusion. In a survey of over 47,000 attendees, 57% of respondents reported benefiting from better social connections through attending their local Neighbourhood House (Perry & Richards, 2019).

Neighbourhood Houses and Centres also play an important role in community capacity-building, helping to strengthen local networks and promote skills

development, while also holding valuable information about local populations and resources. In recognition of this role, they have been called the 'brain banks' of community knowledge (QCOSS, 2017: 3).

Connection, Belonging and Community in Australia

Research shows that social connectedness can promote feelings of belonging, purpose, identity, and security (Cohen et al., 2000). There is also strong evidence linking sense of community and belonging with better health and wellbeing (Carpiano & Hystad, 2012; Kitchen et al., 2012; Wilkins, Vera-Toscano & Botha, 2024; Syme, 2000). Conversely, social isolation is associated with health and wellbeing risks, including higher rates of mental and physical illness, distress, suicide, dementia, and early death (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Manera et al., 2022).

Recent data suggests almost one in seven Australians (15%) is socially isolated, with men (17%) at higher risk than women (13%) (AIHW, 2025). On the related metric of loneliness, around one in six Australians say they often feel very lonely (Wilkins et al., 2024: 29), while one in eight (12%) say they have no close friends (MYMAVINS, 2025: 5).

Social isolation is also entangled with inequality. Australians living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are more likely to be socially isolated (54%) than those living in neighbourhoods with low levels of disadvantage (41%) (Lim, 2023: 18). In a recent Australian survey, almost 70% of respondents said the rising cost of living had changed how they socialise, resulting in fewer outings, more cheap/free activities, and more meetups at home or locally, while one in five avoided making social plans due to costs (MYMAVINS, 2025: 27).

Another 2025 survey found that sense of community has recently declined in Australia. One-third of respondents (33%) rated their sense of community as excellent or very good, down from 37% in 2022. More people (30%) also rated their sense of community as being poor or fair, slightly up from 28% in 2022 (Beyond Blue/Social Research Centre, 2025).

'Civic engagement' refers to a wide range of activities including volunteering, voting, and taking part in community-based programs. Civic engagement is an important indicator of social capital (Kapuchu, 2011: 325) and tends to be lower in disadvantaged cohorts (Cameron, 2025: 5). While research suggests Australia has high levels of civic engagement compared to other democracies globally, some studies point to a recent decline in Australians' civic engagement (Cameron, 2025; Volunteering Australia, 2024: 40).

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This evaluation addresses the following set of related research questions:

Primary Research Question

- Is the Supporting Stronger Communities (SSC) Grant Program achieving its desired social outcomes – namely, contributing to strengthened sense of belonging, social connectedness, sense of community, and social capital?

Additional Research Questions

- What do improved sense of belonging, social connectedness, sense of community, and social capital look like in the communities involved?
- How has the SSC Grant Program helped to strengthen these social outcomes?
- What factors constrain program impact?

1.5 KEY CONCEPTS

This evaluation focuses on four important concepts that align closely with the SSC Grant Program's desired social outcomes. Brief definitions for each concept are noted below, along with their core elements. While the definitions are distinct, there are some overlaps between them.

These concepts matter because belonging and social connection are closely linked to individual and community wellbeing. A strong sense of belonging helps people feel accepted, valued, included, and connected to others. Social connectedness provides access to friendship, support, information, and shared activities. Sense of community strengthens people's identification with local groups and places. Social capital supports trust, reciprocity, cooperation, and the networks that help communities and individuals respond to change. These outcomes are especially important for people experiencing inequality or disadvantage, who may face greater barriers to participation and connection.

Sense of Belonging

- **Definition:** A subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences (Allen et al., 2021).
- **Elements:** Acceptance, valued involvement, fit, social connection (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995; Lee & Robbins, 1995).

Social Connectedness

- **Definition:** The degree to which people have – and perceive that they have – the desired number, quality, and diversity of relationships that create a sense of belonging, and being cared for, valued, and supported (CDC, 2024).
- **Elements:** Social interaction, social support, social networks, sense of belonging, absence of perceived social isolation (Tough, Siegrist & Fekete, 2017; Lamblin et al., 2017).

Sense of Community

- **Definition:** A feeling of belonging amongst members, a sense they matter to one another and the group, and a shared faith their needs will be met through their commitment to be together (McMillan & Chavis, 1986: 9).
- **Elements:** Membership (belonging), influence (mattering), needs fulfilment (via resources accessed through group membership), emotional connection (shared history, places, time, experiences) (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Social Capital

- **Definition:** Resources – such as social support, information channels, and social credentials – that are embedded within a person's social networks (Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2015: 63).
- **Elements:** Patterns and density of social connections (networks, ties, roles, rules); nature and quality of relationships (trust, cooperation norms, reciprocity, expectations, identification); shared understandings for collective action (values, beliefs, attitudes, narratives) (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Claridge, 2018: 2).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 STUDY DESIGN

This study used a mixed-methods approach, a flexible methodology well-suited to capturing both program impact and participant experiences across diverse community contexts. Balancing breadth and depth, this approach enabled the research team to capture both generalisable findings and contextual nuance.

Data was collected via three channels:

- Surveys
- Interviews
- Collaborative workshops (STICKE)

To evaluate the SSC Grant Program's social impacts, the study draws on the academic literature addressing four key concepts:

- Sense of belonging
- Social connectedness
- Sense of community
- Social capital

By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, the evaluation was able to capture rich insights about program members' sense of belonging, social connectedness, sense of community, and social capital, while also surfacing rich insights into how and why the SSC Grant Program is or is not achieving these desired social outcomes.

2.2 STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Three participant groups contributed to this evaluation. All study participants were aged 18 years or over, and informed consent was obtained before participation.

- **Program managers:** Staff members, coordinators, or lead facilitators responsible for managing or delivering SSC-funded programs at participating Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres. These participants took part in surveys, interviews, and the workshops. Their involvement provided insights into program aims, delivery models, implementation challenges, observed participant outcomes, and local contextual and systems-level factors affecting program success.
- **Program members:** Community members taking part in local SSC-funded programs delivered by participating Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres around Australia. Participants completed surveys exploring their sense of belonging, social connectedness, sense of community, hopes for the program, and perceived program benefits.
- **Other local stakeholders**: Local stakeholders participated in the collaborative workshop phase only. This group included select program managers, facilitators, volunteers, partner organisations, referral agencies, and other community representatives involved in, or closely connected to, SSC-funded programs. Stakeholders were invited to contribute broader local and systems-level knowledge about the factors supporting or constraining sense of belonging, social connection, sense of community, and social capital.

By including these three diverse participant groups, the evaluation was able to capture and integrate program members' perceptions and experiences, program manager perspectives, and wider stakeholder insights into the operation and impact of the SSC Grant Program.

2.3 SURVEY METHODS

Surveys provide an efficient way of collecting information quickly from multiple people, without requiring a major time commitment from them. Both program managers and program members were surveyed for this evaluation. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained. All survey respondents were aged 18 years or over.

Surveys were designed to be anonymous to protect privacy, encourage honesty, and maximise response rates. For this reason, surveys did not include participant identifiers enabling individual responses to be traced to specific people or linked across time.

Recruitment and Data Collection

Program member surveys were administered by local program managers or facilitators at participating Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres. Surveys were completed onsite, during program sessions.

Program members could choose to complete their surveys either on paper or online (via Qualtrics). Taking 6–8 minutes to complete, these surveys explored:

- people's subjective experiences of belonging, sense of community, and social connectedness
- what they hoped to gain from taking part in the program
- whether and how they were finding the program useful
- basic demographic data (age, gender, language, length of local residence).

A Survey Kit containing printed materials and survey instructions was mailed out to program managers. Where language or literacy posed a barrier to participation, a program facilitator read survey questions aloud to the participant and recorded their responses on the survey form.

Program members placed their completed surveys and consent forms in a sealed envelope. Sealed envelopes were placed in a collection box, and program managers mailed them back to the research team in a reply-paid satchel. The researchers then scanned paper surveys and keyed the data into Qualtrics for analysis.

Program manager surveys were run online (via Qualtrics). Email invitations were sent to all program managers, with a link to the online survey form. Taking 10–15 minutes, the program manager surveys explored:

- desired program outcomes
- how the need for the program was identified
- their involvement in program delivery
- involvement of other local stakeholders in program design/delivery/referral
- basic demographic data (as above).

Sample survey forms are included in the Appendix section of this report (p.65–70).

Survey Timing and Study Cohorts

This evaluation focused on two cohorts of SSC-funded programs, representing successful applicants from two consecutive funding rounds:

- **Cohort A:** April 2025 round
- **Cohort B:** September 2025 round

These two cohorts were included to ensure the evaluation captured a sufficiently broad and diverse sample of SSC-funded programs. Because individual programs operated on different timelines, survey timing was aligned to each cohort's stage of program delivery, rather than using a single fixed data collection point. For Cohort A,

surveys were collected around the mid-point and endpoint of program delivery. For Cohort B, surveys were collected towards the start and mid-point of program delivery (see Figure 3.2, p.17). This staggered design enabled the evaluation to examine early-stage expectations, emerging outcomes, and later-stage reflections on program impact.

Survey Tools and Validated Scales

Survey design was grounded in the academic literature addressing the four key concepts underpinning this study: sense of belonging, social connectedness, sense of community, and social capital.

The program member surveys used both text-based and numeric instruments, including established tools for assessing a person's sense of belonging and sense of community. Known as validated scales, these tools have been tested for accuracy and consistency. Our choice of validated scales was closely informed by the study context, including the diverse backgrounds and literacy levels of participants.

The first three survey questions were based on two validated scales and an open-ended qualitative assessment tool.

Q1: Sense of Belonging Scale (SBS-8, state form): Designed to measure a person's context-specific sense of belonging over a chosen timeframe (Mellinger et al., 2024), this eight-item validated scale uses a mix of positively and negatively worded statements to capture core elements of sense of belonging: acceptance, valued involvement, fit, and social connection (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995; Lee & Robbins, 1995).

Program members were asked to reflect on their feelings of belonging to their local community over the previous six months. 'Local community' was defined as 'the local people and groups you interact with and have a connection to'. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale, from 'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree'.

Q2: Ten Words tool: This simple, open-ended prompt invites people to share their feelings and thoughts about belonging. Program members were asked to write down up to ten words that come to mind when they think about their sense of belonging to their local community. General descriptors (good, feel) and words repeated from the prompt itself (belonging, community) were excluded from analysis. While this tool is designed to elicit qualitative data about sense of belonging, responses can also serve as an indicator of social capital (Ahn, 2017).

Q3: Inclusion of Community in Self Scale (ICSS): This validated scale is a simple pictorial tool designed to measure a person's sense of 'community connectedness': the extent to which they see their community as part of their self (Mashek, Cannaday & Tangney, 2007). It presents a set of seven paired circles, or Venn diagrams, depicting gradually increasing degrees of overlap between community and self. Respondents were asked to choose the image that best represents their relationship with their own local community. The pictorial tool can be viewed in the Appendix section (see p.66).

Developed as a quick measure for diverse populations with varying literacy levels, the ICSS is grounded in core elements of 'psychological sense of community': ties and friendships (shared emotional connections); support (needs fulfillment); belonging (membership of a community); and conscious identification (Obst et al., 2002; McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Q4: Benefits of Program Participation. The final survey question explored what people hoped to get out of the program, and whether and how they were finding it useful. Four checkboxes were presented, listing broad categories of potential program benefits, with space to elaborate through brief written responses. The four checkbox options were: 'New Information or knowledge', 'Useful resources', 'Social Connections', and 'Anything else?'

Data Analysis

Survey data was analysed using a combination of qualitative thematic analysis (for the qualitative/text-based data) and descriptive statistical analysis (for the quantitative/numerical data).

Qualitative data, including written responses to the Ten Words prompt and the program benefits question, were reviewed and analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns, concepts, experiences, and examples. We then analysed emergent findings against formal definitions of the study's four key concepts to provide a nuanced and empirically grounded assessment of social outcomes. While our analysis drew on all qualitative data, later-stage responses were particularly relevant for understanding program impact.

Quantitative responses were summarised using frequencies, percentages and, where relevant, mean scores. Responses to the Sense of Belonging Scale were scored in line with the tool's structure, including reverse-scoring for negatively worded items. Overall survey findings were then analysed to identify emerging patterns both within and across cohorts, survey rounds, and participant groups.

2.4 INTERVIEW METHODS

To inform the evaluation, we conducted semi-structured interviews with seven program managers. The aim was to explore their experiences of delivering SSC-funded programs in local Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres. These interviews were undertaken as part of a Master of Public Health thesis by a student researcher, working under the supervision of a senior researcher/project lead.

An interview guide was developed to address the following questions:

- What do program managers perceive as the benefits of SSC programs for participants' social wellbeing?
- What are key barriers and enablers influencing program implementation?
- What opportunities do program managers identify for improving future program delivery?

A qualitative descriptive approach was the chosen methodology for these interviews. This approach is useful where there is no existing information on the topic and the research is exploratory in nature. Specifically, it focuses on the 'what', 'who', and 'where' of the phenomenon under investigation (Sandelowski, 2000).

This approach also enables researchers to explore study participants' experiences and perspectives as close to the data as possible, without imposing further theoretical interpretation (Sandelowski, 2000). However, descriptive approaches are still informed by pre-existing knowledge; in the case of this research, that includes understandings of sense of belonging, social connectedness, sense of community, and social capital.

In reporting the interview findings, we use the terms 'social outcomes' and 'social wellbeing' as umbrella terms for the key concepts that underpin this study: sense of belonging, social connectedness, sense of community, and social capital. The interviews did not seek to tease apart these complex constructs.

Sampling and Recruitment

Purposive convenience sampling was used to recruit program managers from the two cohorts of SSC-funded programs taking part in this evaluation. Target participants included program managers who were unable to survey their program members due to resourcing challenges, timing issues, or eligibility barriers. Program managers were eligible to take part in interviews if they were the designated coordinator, manager, or primary facilitator directly responsible for an SSC-funded program. Participants were required to be English-speaking, as there was no access to translator services.

Program managers received an email invitation from the student researcher to participate in the study. A Plain Language Statement and Consent Form were sent with the invitation. Program managers replied directly to the Student Researcher if they wished to participate and returned their signed Consent Form. Interviews were then scheduled and conducted at a time convenient to the program manager.

The researchers aimed to recruit up to 10 program managers, or to continue recruitment until data saturation was reached, whichever occurred first. Data saturation is guided by the concept of information power, or the extent to which the sample provides sufficient depth and relevance of information to address the research aim (Malterud et al., 2016). Data saturation was reached when recurring codes were identified across seven completed interviews, and no new concepts were apparent.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were conducted by the student researcher through Zoom. All interviews were audio-recorded, with transcriptions generated through the Zoom platform and saved to a secure Deakin Cloud folder. Interview transcripts were then cleaned and de-identified by the student researcher, who cross-checked transcripts with audio recordings for any errors.

Analysis of interview data was guided by the method of Braun et al. (2019). Following data familiarisation, data were assigned inductive codes. Initially, two interviews were coded independently by the two researchers. A list of codes was then developed through discussion and consensus. Remaining interviews were coded by the student researcher. The researchers then compared transcripts to identify commonalities and differences, leading to the formation of tentative themes. Theme refinement and identification of exemplar quotes were finalised through a reflexive process between the two researchers.

2.5 WORKSHOP METHODS

Alongside surveys and interviews, this study also used a participatory process known as Systems Thinking in Community Knowledge Exchange, or STICKE. Developed at Deakin University, STICKE is a collaborative, systems-mapping process designed to bring together diverse stakeholders to build shared understandings of complex social issues. It is particularly well-suited to exploring the collective impacts of diverse community-

based programs, whereby tailored supports and activities are delivered to different groups in specific local settings.

Through collaborative workshops, the STICKE process convenes a cross-section of people with varied knowledge of a specific issue, empowering them to generate shared understandings far richer than any one person could have arrived at separately. STICKE workshops use a custom-built digital tool to uncover, share, and clarify collective knowledge. Guided by a trained facilitator, participants co-create a series of causal loop diagrams – visual maps that illustrate the relationships between various factors that shape a complex issue.

Recruitment

A two-part online workshop was held in June 2026. Participants included program managers and other key staff involved in delivering SSC-funded programs, along with representatives from ANHCA, state and territory Neighbourhood House peak bodies, and the program funder. Recruitment aimed to bring together people with practical knowledge of program delivery, grant administration, sector coordination, and funding, rather than to represent every funded program or include program members directly.

The STICKE workshops followed a structured format, with the second session building upon the first. Attendees were given a short initial overview of emerging insights from the survey data, then invited to reflect on key challenges, identify contributing factors, and explore how these factors might be linked. Over the two sessions, the group developed and refined the system maps as new insights emerged, collectively identified barriers to/enablers of system change, and generated ideas for future action.

Data Collection and Analysis

Workshop data was captured through multiple sources: the digital system maps produced in STICKE, written entries and annotations generated during the sessions, facilitator notes, and workshop recordings/transcripts. During the workshops, a trained facilitator guided discussion while a modeller updated the system map in real time and note-takers recorded key comments, explanations, and examples. Between the two sessions, the research team reviewed the workshop notes alongside the evolving map, refining factor names, clarifying causal links, identifying feedback loops, and grouping related parts of the map into themes.

Data analysis focused on identifying the relationships between factors, recurring barriers and enablers, areas where change was seen as possible or necessary, and proposed action ideas.

Finally, the workshop findings were synthesised with survey and interview findings to identify cross-cutting insights about how SSC-funded programs support, or are constrained in supporting, sense of belonging, social connection, sense of community, and social capital.

3. STUDY FINDINGS

This section presents findings from the surveys, interviews, and workshops conducted for this evaluation. Findings are organised around the study's primary research question: Is the Supporting Stronger Communities (SSC) Grant Program achieving its desired outcomes: sense of belonging, social connectedness, sense of community, and social capital?

The Findings section also addresses the study's additional research questions: What do strengthened belonging, connection, community, and social capital look like in the communities involved; how is the SSC Grant Program supporting these outcomes; and what gaps, barriers, and opportunities enhance or constrain the program's impact?

Across the findings, our four key concepts provide the main interpretive frame for assessing social outcomes:

- Sense of belonging
- Social connectedness
- Sense of community
- Social capital

Program member survey findings combine quantitative and qualitative evidence to provide insights on overall patterns, perceived program benefits, and how participants experienced belonging, connection, community, and program value.

Findings from the program manager surveys and interviews provide delivery and organisational perspectives, while the workshop findings extend the analysis to the wider systems influencing program outcomes. Findings across all evidence sources are brought together in the Discussion and Conclusions section of this report (see p.47–57).

Study Participation

This evaluation draws on original data collected from SSC-funded programs delivered by local Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres around Australia in 2025 and 2026.

Programs were recruited from two consecutive funding rounds: Cohort A (April 2025) and Cohort B (September 2025). From a total of 26 programs, 20 programs agreed to take part in the study (approximately 77%). The resulting dataset encompasses all Australian states/territories where SSC funding was awarded in 2025.

Figure 3.1 (below) illustrates participation patterns across the two study cohorts and all data sources: program member surveys, program manager surveys, interviews, and workshops.

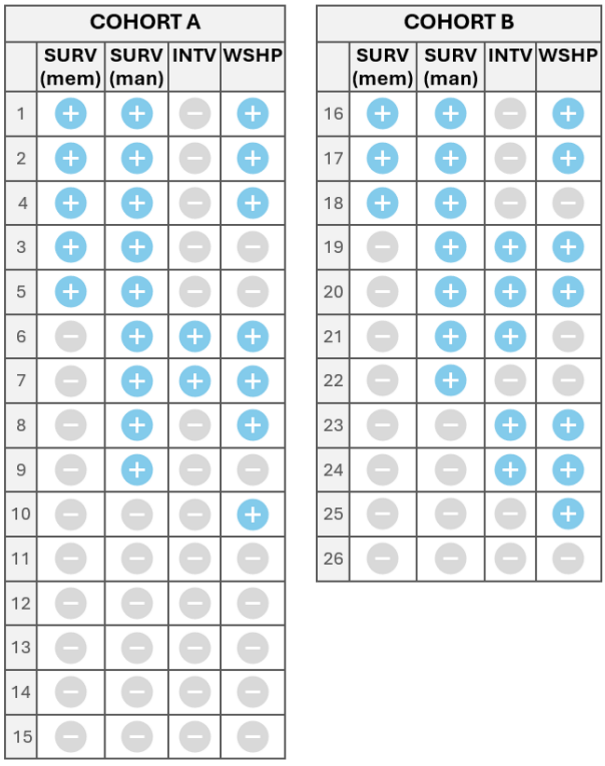


Figure 3.1: Study participation (all data sources)

3.1 SURVEY FINDINGS

Findings from the program member surveys are presented first, followed by a summary of key insights from program manager surveys.

Program Member Survey Findings

The qualitative survey data unearthed rich insights about program members' lived experiences, including first-hand descriptions of program benefits. The quantitative survey data provides statistical evidence about broader patterns, demographics, and reported benefits.

Qualitative (textual) data was collected via written responses to the Ten Words prompt (Q2) and open-ended questions about program benefits (Q4). The qualitative analysis provides deeper insight into how participants described belonging, connection and community, the role of relationships and shared activities, and the practical and social benefits they associated with their programs.

Quantitative (numerical) data was collected using the Sense of Belonging Scale (Q1), the Inclusion of Community in Self Scale (Q3), and check-box questions about program benefits (Q4). The quantitative analysis in this section examines broad 'earlier' and 'later' patterns in sense of belonging, social connectedness, sense of community, and reported program benefits.

Again, it should be noted that the evaluation was designed to assess the SSC Grant Program as a whole, rather than the local programs run by individual Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres. While cohort-specific findings are reported where they aid interpretation, the primary focus is on patterns seen across the broader group of programs that took part in this study.

Survey Participation

In total, 178 completed program member surveys were available for analysis across both cohorts and all survey rounds. Eight programs surveyed their members (40% of eligible programs). Six programs were not eligible to survey members due to age restrictions or participant vulnerabilities, while eight programs were unable to do so due to resourcing challenges or program timeframes. Four programs did not respond to survey invitations.

Response numbers reflect a mix of factors common to community-based evaluations of this type, including participants' diverse literacy and language backgrounds, the voluntary nature of participation, varied program structures and durations, and the resource constraints faced by small community organisations.

- **Cohort A** (April 2025 funding round): Five programs returned the first survey, yielding 51 responses. Four of those programs also returned the second survey, yielding 38 responses.
- **Cohort B** (September 2025 funding round): Three programs returned both surveys. The first survey yielded 59 responses, while the second survey yielded 30 responses.

Survey Timing

Programs taking part in this study had diverse timeframes. The two cohorts were established roughly five months apart, reflecting the two consecutive funding rounds. Timeframes also varied within each cohort, with individual programs having different durations, start dates, and end dates. As a result, the timing of program member surveys also varied.

Figure 3.2 (below) illustrates the timing of these surveys. To clarify our analysis, we use the broad terms 'earlier' and 'later' to denote the timing of survey rounds and report patterns in the data.

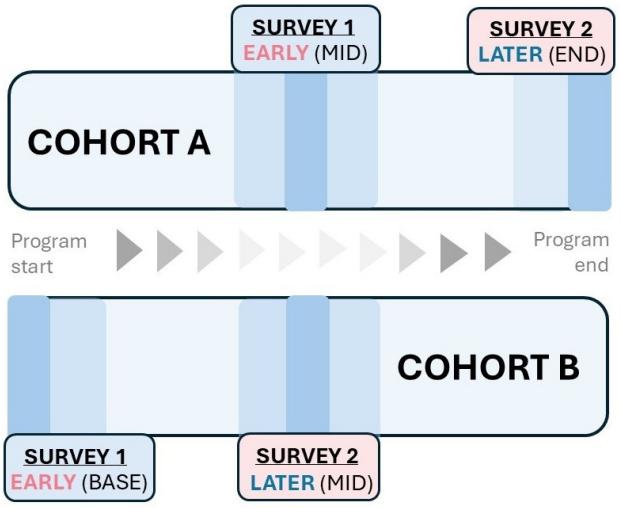


Figure 3.2: Timing of program member surveys

Generally, most respondents in Cohort A completed Survey 1 near the middle stage of their program ('mid'), and Survey 2 near the final session ('end'). In Cohort B, most respondents completed Survey 1 near the program's start ('base'), and Survey 2 towards the midpoint of delivery ('mid').

The staggered and uneven program timelines are an important factor when interpreting the quantitative survey data (see *Limits on Interpretation*, p.26–27). These timing variations ruled out any comparison of precise baseline and post-implementation metrics. Consequently, the survey rounds are analysed as repeated cross-sectional samples, rather than traditional pre/post-program measurements.

Demographic Insights

The program member sample included a diverse participant mix, although the demographic data reflects the target communities of participating programs.

Both cohorts were predominantly female. For Cohort A, around 88% of early-stage respondents with valid gender data identified as female. Almost half of those who provided valid demographic data were aged 60 years or older, 63% spoke a Language Other Than English (LOTE) at home, and 61% had lived in the local area for more than ten years. The endpoint sample had a similar profile.

Cohort B also skewed female, but with a more varied gender profile. At the first survey, around two-thirds of respondents with valid gender data identified as female, close to one-third identified as male, and a small number identified as non-binary or preferred not to state their gender. Older people remained prominent: approximately two-thirds of respondents with valid demographic data were aged 60 years or over, around 45% spoke a language other than English at home, and just over half had lived locally for more than ten years. The midpoint sample for this cohort was somewhat more evenly divided by gender but continued to include a high proportion of older participants.

Demographic variations between the two cohorts reflect the fact that funded programs serve different communities and participant groups. However, the demographic composition of the combined earlier and later samples was broadly comparable across gender, age, LOTE status, and length of local residence.

Belonging: Qualitative Insights

The Ten Words prompt asked program members to write up to ten words or short phrases that came to mind when they thought about their sense of belonging to their local community. Figure 3.3 (overleaf) provides a visual representation of word frequency from this collated data.

Survey responses emphasised the importance of friendships, social relationships, and positive shared experiences. Program members frequently described sense of belonging as a feeling of being recognised, valued, accepted, welcomed, and included:

- 'Happy, valued, accepted, integrated, listened to.'
- 'A sense of being valued and involved in my community.'
- 'Connected, valued, heard, appreciated.'
- 'Belonging is not inclusion; sense of belonging means feel[ing] comfortable and accepted.'

Responses were frequently anchored in people's experiences of the program itself. While the survey setting may have encouraged this framing, its repeated occurrence suggests many participants understood their program group or Neighbourhood House as an important site of belonging. Here, sense of belonging was associated with meeting new people, enjoying shared activities, making new friends, and feeling that they had a recognised place within the group:

- 'Very friendly people, I feel very welcome whenever I come here.'
- 'I feel I belong to the group. Great activities and events.'
- 'It's my club.'
- 'Many new friends at the community [centre], always feel welcomed.'

Some respondents associated belonging with support. However, rather than framing program members as passively receiving support from facilitators, many responses highlighted agency, active contribution, and horizontal peer-to-peer supports. People spoke about offering voluntary work, exchanging knowledge, using their skills, contributing to their community, and helping others. These accounts position belonging as a reciprocal program experience, involving both giving and receiving:

- 'Being part of something that benefits the community.'
- 'Feel prompted to offer voluntary work.'
- 'I made new friends, we shared our knowledge and experience.'
- 'The connections made by helping.'

Notably, in describing their program experiences, respondents frequently used words that align closely with empirically grounded definitions of belonging. In particular, the core elements of sense of belonging recurred across the written responses: acceptance, valued involvement, fit, and social connection (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995; Lee & Robbins, 1995).

However, the qualitative data also revealed some experiences that were markedly less positive. A small subset of participants, including some people who had recently left prison, described low belonging, profound isolation, and difficulty re-entering community life. Their words contrast sharply with the dominant themes of friendship, welcome, and acceptance. To gain deeper insights about this subgroup, we conducted a separate analysis of this data (see *Snapshot Analysis*, p.27–28).

Survey 1 | Cohort A:



Survey 1 | Cohort B:



Survey 2 | Cohort A:



Survey 2 | Cohort B:



Figure 3.3: Program member survey responses – Ten Words tool (sense of belonging)

Belonging: Quantitative Insights

Sense of Belonging scores were calculated using the eight-item Sense of Belonging Scale (SBS-8, state form) (Mellinger et al., 2024). Four negatively worded items were reverse scored before calculating a mean score from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating stronger belonging. A score was calculated when at least six of the eight items on the scale had been completed.

From 178 completed program member surveys in total, 165 contained sufficient responses to calculate a Sense of Belonging score (see Table 3.1, opposite). Valid scale completion was high at earlier survey stages, but lower at later stages, particularly at program endpoint for Cohort A. The scale showed strong internal consistency in all survey rounds, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.87 to 0.96.

Overall, belonging scores were high for both cohorts at every measured stage (see Table 3.2, opposite). Cohort A recorded a mean score of 4.40 at its earlier stage (Survey 1) and 4.32 at its later stage (Survey 2). Cohort B recorded an earlier-stage mean of 4.20 (Survey 1) and 3.88 at its later stage (Survey 2). When both cohorts were pooled, the earlier-stage mean was 4.29 and the later-stage mean was 4.11. The overall difference of -0.19 points was small and statistically uncertain (95% confidence interval: -0.49 to 0.12; p = .225; Cohen's d = -0.19).

Statistical tests indicated only small differences in sample composition between the two cohorts, and adjusting the analysis for cohort and these demographic characteristics did not materially change the findings. Any observed patterns are therefore unlikely to be explained solely by a major demographic shift between survey rounds.

Survey round	Stage	N	Valid N
Cohort A: Survey 1	Earlier (Mid-program)	51	50
Cohort A: Survey 2	Later (Endpoint)	38	30
Cohort B: Survey 1	Earlier (Baseline)	59	57
Cohort B: Survey 2	Later (Mid-program)	30	28
Total		178	165

Table 3.1: Sense of Belonging Scale – valid responses

Cohort	Earlier (N)	Later (N)	Diff.	d
Cohort A	4.40 (50)	4.32 (30)	-0.08	-0.11
Cohort B	4.20 (57)	3.88 (28)	-0.32	-0.29
Overall	4.29 (107)	4.11 (58)	-0.19	-0.19

Table 3.2: Belonging scores – earlier and later stages

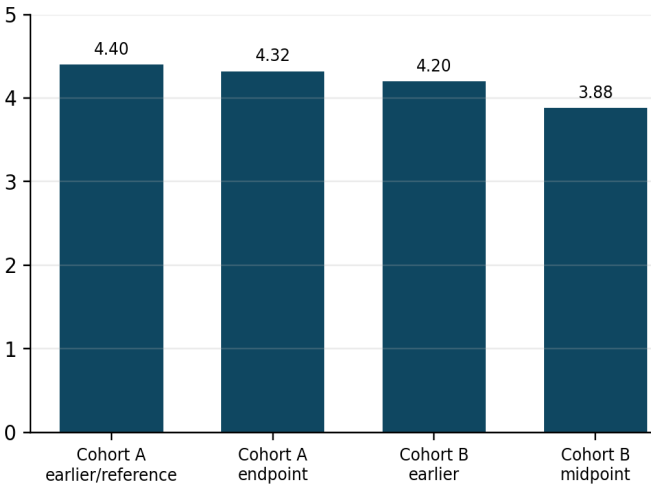


Figure 3.4: Mean belonging scores by cohort and survey stage (score range: 1–5)

Adjustment for cohort, gender, age, LOTE status, and length of local residence reduced the estimated later-stage difference to -0.12 points. This adjusted difference also remained statistically uncertain (95% confidence interval: -0.43 to 0.19; p = .444). A complete-case sensitivity analysis produced the same overall conclusion. There was no evidence the earlier- to later-stage pattern differed reliably between the cohorts.

These quantitative results do not provide evidence of a measurable increase in belonging between the earlier and later survey stages. Nor do they provide reliable evidence of a decline. Mean scores remained high, and observed differences were small relative to the uncertainty around them: 44% of respondents with valid earlier-stage scores were already at the maximum possible score of 5. This created a substantial ceiling effect, which limited the study's ability to detect improvement over time (see *Limits on Interpretation*, p.26–27).

Response numbers were also lower than anticipated in the original study design. With 107 valid earlier-stage and 58 valid later-stage belonging scores, the pooled analysis had 80% power to detect an effect of approximately d = 0.46 or larger. It was therefore capable of identifying a moderate difference, but had limited sensitivity to detect small changes.

The first-round survey responses provide useful context for the composite scores. In Cohort A, agreement with the four positively worded statements ranged from 88% to 94%. Most respondents reported feeling that they belonged, were valued, fitted in and felt connected with other people in their community. Disagreement with the four negatively worded statements ranged from 76% to 84%, again indicating an overall strong sense of belonging.

Cohort B also reported a broadly positive pattern, although its first-round results were somewhat more varied. Agreement with positively worded items ranged from approximately 79% to 86%, while disagreement with negatively worded items ranged from approximately 70% to 79%. These differences are consistent with Cohort B's lower composite mean, and the greater diversity of participant experiences evident in their written responses.

The strong overall averages should not obscure the experiences of smaller but meaningful subgroups with notably lower sense of belonging scores. At the first survey, around one-fifth of respondents in each cohort reported that they did not feel accepted as a member of their local community. Overall, around one in eight participants also reported feeling disregarded by, distant from, or unable to fit in with others in their community. Sense of belonging was thus not uniformly strong, even in cohorts with high average scores.

Social Connectedness and Sense of Community: Qualitative Insights

The text-based survey responses illustrate how social connectedness and sense of community were experienced through program participation. Program involvement was strongly associated with new social connections and friendships, along with group identification.

Program members repeatedly described meeting new people, making friends, talking with others, sharing activities and experiences, and receiving emotional or practical support. This was especially evident in later-stage responses:

- ‘[The program] has helped me make new friends and get to know other people better.’
- ‘Friendly, easy-going people to mix with. Always feel included.’
- ‘I really enjoy cooking with my new friends.’
- ‘Great support from program staff.’

The survey data demonstrates how programs provided regular, semi-structured opportunities for social interaction, social support, and extension of social networks – three core elements of social connectedness (Tough, Siegrist & Fekete, 2017; Lamblin et al., 2017). This was especially important for people who were no longer working, were new to the local area, or otherwise had limited social contact outside the program:

- ‘I think it’s fantastic that these programs help with social connections when we move to a place that we don’t know.’
- ‘This program helps to meet new people + interact with different groups, especially now [I am] no longer working.’
- ‘It helps me to socialise with people and thus know much about this country.’

Several responses went beyond individual friendships to express identification with the program or group. Statements such as ‘I feel I belong to the group’, ‘It’s my club’, and descriptions of the Neighbourhood House as a trusted place indicate a sense of membership, conscious identification, and shared emotional connection, reflecting key elements of sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Obst et al., 2002).

Many respondents identified sense of community within the program and/or Neighbourhood House itself, referencing supportive relationships they had built with centre staff, facilitators, and volunteers:

- ‘Always a friendly atmosphere.’
- ‘Nice and kind and always loving and caring.’
- ‘The team at [Neighbourhood House] has always been ready to assist when they can.’

Across the written responses, program members repeatedly described their participation in terms that reflect both social connectedness and sense of community: enjoying social interactions, accessing social and practical supports, expanding their personal networks, reducing isolation, forming new friendships, and feeling a sense of membership and identification with their program group.

For some respondents, there were also indications that the program may have enhanced their ability to form future social connections by improving their confidence and skills around interacting with others:

- ‘Given me more confidence mixing with people I don’t know.’
- ‘Social interaction learning.’

For a small subgroup of very isolated participants, the program was one of very few available sources of social connection in their lives. A separate analysis of survey responses from this program group revealed low levels of connection to the wider community, alongside responses pointing to growing social connections and sense of community emerging within the group itself as the program progressed (see *Snapshot Analysis*, p.27–28).

Social Connectedness and Sense of Community: Quantitative Insights

Responses to the 'program benefits' question provided broad quantitative evidence for social connectedness outcomes, with 83% of program members reporting they had made new social connections through program involvement.

Sense of community (community connectedness) was assessed using the Inclusion of Community in Self Scale (ICSS), a visual tool designed for diverse populations with varying literacy levels (see Appendix, p.66). Grounded in 'psychological sense of community', the ICSS is a seven-option pictorial measure showing progressively greater overlap between 'self' and 'community' (Mashek, Cannaday & Tangney, 2007). Higher scores represent a stronger sense that the community is incorporated into a person's sense of self.

In Cohort A's first survey, 61% of respondents chose one of the two highest-overlap images, while 17% chose one of the two lowest-overlap options. Cohort B's first-round responses were more widely distributed: 39% selected the two highest-overlap images and 24% selected the two lowest. This first-round contrast is consistent with the somewhat stronger belonging scores recorded by Cohort A and the inclusion of several participants experiencing acute isolation in Cohort B.

Across all available survey rounds, however, there was no statistically reliable overall change in the community connectedness score. The median was 5 out of 7 at both the pooled earlier and later stages. Cohort A's mean score fell from 5.35 to 4.41, while Cohort B's mean rose slightly from 4.29 to 4.46. When combined, the overall earlier-versus-later comparison was not statistically significant (Mann-Whitney $p = .279$). The divergent cohort patterns reinforce the need to interpret the pooled overall result, rather than treating one cohort as representative of all funded programs.

As with belonging, the absence of a measurable increase in sense of community scores does not represent a lack of program contribution on this front. As outlined below (see p.26–27), several important factors limit the interpretation of this quantitative data. Most survey respondents had already been involved in their program for several months before the first community connectedness measure was taken. This early participation may have contributed to strong first-round belonging and community connectedness scores, particularly where the program itself had already become a meaningful community setting for participants.

Any differences between survey rounds may thus reflect changes in sample composition and/or variations associated with program stage. Conversely, stable group averages may conceal improvement among some individuals, alongside steady or declining scores among others. The data cannot distinguish between these possibilities, because individual survey responses could not be linked across rounds for ethical and privacy reasons.

Program Benefits and Social Capital: Qualitative Insights

Surveys did not attempt to directly measure social capital, a complex construct that is not readily captured in short surveys exploring multiple social outcomes.

In addition, strengthening social capital is often a gradual process, requiring repeated interactions that unfold over longer timeframes (Soubeyran & Weber, 2002).

However, written survey responses indicate program outcomes consistent with social-capital formation, in line with empirically grounded definitions of the concept: new and strengthened social ties, extension of personal networks, access to resources, mutual support, information exchange, social credentials, participation, trust, reciprocity, and opportunities to contribute (Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2015; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Claridge, 2018).

The Ten Words tool is particularly useful for identifying the everyday relational dimensions through which social capital may be experienced (Ahn, 2017). Frequent program-anchored references to friends, people, support, shared activities, volunteering, cultural exchange, and passing knowledge on to others suggest that SSC-funded programs can create settings where social networks are formed or strengthened, people's access to resources and information is expanded and improved, and trust and reciprocity are being developed.

The final survey question asked whether program involvement had helped participants connect with three broad categories of benefit: new information or knowledge, useful resources, or social connections. Written responses provide deeper insights on what program benefits look like in practice, including indications of positive impacts for social capital. This was particularly evident in later-stage surveys, when most respondents had been engaged with the program for longer periods.

Under 'new knowledge or information', respondents described how the program had helped them find out about local services, events and activities, gain valuable new skills, develop creative abilities, improve their English or other skills, learn recipes, navigate systems, and understand where to seek help. Program members described gaining knowledge that was immediately relevant to daily life and, in some cases, information they could share with family members or other community members.

Under 'Useful resources', respondents described how the program had connected them with legal, housing, and aged-care information, referrals or links to other services, employment and training opportunities, healthcare options, support groups, help with Centrelink or online forms, and access to toys, games, and digital tools. These examples illustrate how community programs can provide both direct resources and pathways into wider support systems.

Under 'social connections', respondents mentioned making friends, meeting people with similar interests, sharing meals and activities, learning about other cultures, enjoying laughter and companionship, exchanging knowledge, and reducing stress. People described the atmosphere created by facilitators and other members as friendly, welcoming, and supportive:

- 'I met some lovely people and everyone was happy and friendly.'
- 'Hope the program continues & more people join.'
- 'Sharing our cultures with each other.'
- 'Communicating, learning, getting information, makes you feel good and wanted.'
- 'Learning never stops. Can always learn something new.'

Some responses emphasised mutual learning through program members' active contributions, providing evidence of reciprocity and active participation. Others indicated movement beyond the immediate group toward forming bridging connections to services, training, events, and other parts of the community:

- 'To be able to pass it on to others.'
- 'Skills and information from participants.'
- 'Coordinators and participants have a wealth of knowledge about transport, aged care, Medicare, tradies etc.'
- 'The program (social group) has allowed me to engage with businesses in the community trying a variety of things.'

These comments show that perceived program benefits were multifaceted. Learning occurred through relationships, resources and information were accessed through trusted staff and peers, and shared activities provided both practical benefits and opportunities to build social ties.

These indications of social capital remain provisional. The surveys cannot establish whether these benefits persisted after program completion, extended beyond the program group, or produced wider collective action. The interview and workshop findings are thus important for understanding how these participant-level experiences connect to organisational relationships, community networks, and systems-level outcomes.

Program Benefits and Social Capital: Quantitative Insights

In response to the final survey question, a substantial majority of program members reported experiencing all three forms of program benefit. In the later-stage survey, 89% reported gaining new information or knowledge, 81% accessed useful resources, and 83% made new social connections (see Table 3.4 and Figure 3.5, below).

Later-stage reported benefit	Yes	Valid	Yes (%)
New information or knowledge	55	62	89
Useful resources	50	62	81
Social connections	53	64	83

Table 3.4: Key program benefits – later-stage surveys

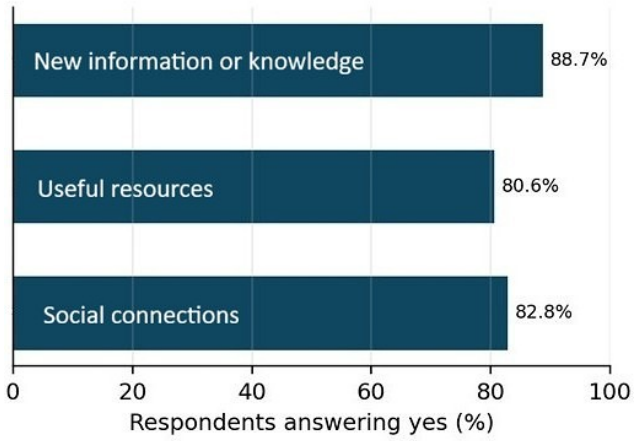


Figure 3.5: Percentage of later-stage survey respondents reporting key program benefits

The 'program benefit' question was worded slightly differently to align with survey stages. Cohort A's first survey, completed at the program midpoint, asked about benefits experienced 'so far'. Cohort B's first survey, completed near commencement, asked what people 'hoped' to gain from the program. In Survey 2, Cohort A was simply asked about benefits experienced, while Cohort B was asked about benefits 'so far'. The resulting percentages should thus be interpreted as evidence of participants' expectations and perceived benefits, rather than a measure of before-and-after change.

Limits on Interpretation: Quantitative Data

Overall, program members reported high levels of belonging and community connectedness at both survey stages. After adjustment for cohort and demographic characteristics, the aggregate scores both remained essentially unchanged between the survey stages.

However, this finding does not point to a lack of social outcomes from program participation. Rather, it highlights several practical constraints in interpreting the quantitative data.

While validated scales can enable comparison between two data points, there are limits on what the resulting data can reliably measure. In the case of this study, available data from the two validated scales (the SBS-8 and the ICSS) does not permit us to draw any conclusions about change over time for belonging or sense of community.

Three factors help explain why this data cannot track temporal change – low participant overlap, high initial scores, and high rates of pre-survey program exposure:

- **Participant overlap:** Our analysis found a low participant overlap between the two survey rounds: less than 29% of Survey 2 respondents also completed Survey 1. The data thus cannot show whether people's belonging and community connectedness scores changed over time, as the two surveys were completed by substantially different groups.
- **High initial scores:** Mean first-round scores were high across both cohorts, with 44% of respondents already recording the maximum possible score of 5. These high initial scores created a substantial ceiling effect, leaving respondents little or no room to move upward on the scale over time.
- **Program exposure:** Most respondents (75%) already had significant program exposure when they completed Survey 1, so initial scores do not reflect pre-program levels of belonging and community connectedness. The high first-round scores may partly reflect program benefits that had already developed prior to the first survey, especially in Cohort A.

Most programs had some fluidity in membership, which contributed to the low participant overlap. Some had a core group of regular members, while others catered for a wider or more fluctuating mix of attendees. Participant overlap was calculated by reviewing separately stored consent records. These records were only used to estimate the overlap and were not linked to participants' specific survey answers.

Due to the uneven program timelines, participants had varying degrees of program exposure when the first survey was completed. Cohort A's first survey was administered around the midpoint of program delivery, when participants had been attending for up to five months.

In addition, some programs had a delayed start, while others faced resource constraints that impacted when staff could administer the surveys. Cohort B's first survey was intended to provide baseline data, but one participating program was unable to survey its members until four months into the program. Those participants made up more than half of Cohort B's first-round responses, so the combined data was not a baseline measure.

Together, these three factors may have contributed to the lack of measurable change in belonging and connection scores: differences in the mix of people who responded at each survey stage, limited room for upward movement from already-high scores, and the influence of early program benefits. The available data cannot distinguish between these explanations.

Cohort differences should likewise be read in context. Cohort A generally recorded stronger first-round belonging and community connectedness scores, while Cohort B included a wider range of experiences and several participants facing acute exclusion. These differences reflect the diversity of programs and target groups supported by the SSC Grant Program, rather than any differences in program value.

Snapshot Analysis: Socially Isolated Sub-Group

One program in Cohort B included a subgroup of respondents who reported very low belonging and connection in Survey 1. In written responses, some of these program members disclosed that they had recently been released from prison. These people reported profound social isolation, with feelings of rejection, distance, and low community identification.

To gain further insights about this group of program members, we conducted a snapshot analysis of all survey data from this program. The sample size was small, so the emerging picture is illustrative only. While individual responses could not be linked to specific people or tracked over time, the data helps to illuminate community needs and program value within a group that included severely isolated people.

For these program members, surveys were completed at the program's outset and midway through. Ten participants took part in each survey. The estimated participant overlap was 60%, meaning six individuals completed both surveys, while four further people completed a single survey in each round. All participants identified as male.

This subgroup's first-round responses to the Ten Words prompt ranged from positive associations related to belonging, to appreciation of program staff, to feelings of profound isolation:

- 'Safe space, community acceptance, open to anyone, connection, loving space, valued, togetherness, judgement-free.'
- 'Great support from program staff.'
- 'None, isolated, felt like an invisible barrier existed between me and everybody else.'
- 'Outcast, unwanted, ignored, undervalued, maltreated, unimportant, disregarded, unloved.'

In Survey 2, the same prompt elicited further responses that were more clearly anchored in people's experiences of the program:

- 'I only feel connected when I 'm with [name of program].'
- 'Really enjoying the diversity of unique individuals in our realm.'
- 'Good cooking and other activities, e.g. games.'
- 'Wellbeing, respected, friendly, always helpful, always happy, trusted, fit in, love the people.'

Responding to the first-round question about their hopes for the program, one participant wrote that they felt angry and alone but trusted the centre because staff had shown

that they cared. Another respondent described being isolated after spending 30 years in jail and hoping the centre would help him learn how to build new social networks:

- 'I can't socialise with former crims. I know no-one else. How does one network or learn how to network? Hopefully here.'

These accounts highlight the importance of trusted facilitators and low-barrier community settings for people who may not yet feel connected to the wider community.

In Survey 2, there was a high rate of positive responses to the questions about perceived program benefits. People wrote that the program was helping them make new friends, learn how to interact socially, and establish healthy boundaries. They also reported practical benefits, including accessing housing support, dental care, and various health services.

For many of these participants, the program's contribution to belonging and connection appeared to be significant:

- 'Provides positive attitude and something to look forward to.'
- '[This program group] is my only form of social interaction. Other than that, I know no-one.'
- 'I do not feel connected with society, but find belonging through this group.'

These responses demonstrate why the high overall scores evident in the quantitative data must be interpreted alongside individual accounts. Participating SSC-funded programs were reaching some people facing severe exclusion, for whom a relatively short period of participation might not be expected to produce rapid movement on a broad metric scale. They also suggest that belonging can be situational: a person may feel welcomed within a program, while continuing to experience exclusion from the wider community.

The evidence here suggests that SSC-funded programs can act as bridging settings between individual isolation and wider community participation. Their contribution may begin with a relatively bounded sense of safety and belonging within the program group, which can create opportunities for broader connections over time. The study could not track whether these connections subsequently extended into wider community networks, but the qualitative data identifies plausible pathways through which this may occur.

While this program group was too small to yield statistically significant results, belonging and community connectedness scores were calculated as a point of comparison with overall scores across the whole study. Respondents' mean belonging score was 2.98 at program start (earlier stage) and 3.04 at program mid-point (later stage). This was substantially lower than the pooled averages of 4.29 (earlier) and 4.11 (later) recorded across the entire study. On community connectedness, this program group recorded a score of 2.9 (earlier stage) and 4.16 (later stage). For comparison, pooled averages across the broader study were 4.80 (earlier) and 4.44 (later).

Summary: Program Member Surveys

These survey findings provide persuasive evidence that SSC-funded programs are supporting stronger social outcomes for participating individuals and communities. Notably, for many respondents, the program itself was seen as an important site of belonging, connection, and community.

Program members described how being involved in the program made them feel welcome, valued, accepted, comfortable, and connected. They repeatedly located belonging, connection, and community in concrete program experiences: meeting new people, making friends, taking part in enjoyable group activities, receiving support, learning new things, sharing knowledge, and actively contributing to the group.

Overall, belonging and community connectedness scores were high and stable. While these validated scales did not identify a measurable increase over time, several factors prevented this quantitative data from measuring temporal change. As noted, this included modest participant overlap between the two survey rounds, high initial scores limiting further upward movement, and the fact that most participants (75%) had been exposed to the program for several months prior to Survey 1, which may have contributed to those strong initial scores.

Despite these limitations, other quantitative data points to a substantial level of perceived program value. Overall, more than four-fifths of later-stage respondents reported program benefits, including gaining new information or knowledge (89%), accessing useful resources (81%), and forming new social connections (83%).

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative evidence presents belonging as relational, activity-based, and unevenly experienced. This latter point is important, as participants' experiences were not uniform. In the first survey, a small sub-group reported feelings of rejection, distance, low community connectedness, and/or profound isolation (see *Snapshot Analysis* section, above). Some funded programs were intentionally working with people facing substantial barriers to social participation, and changes in belonging and community connectedness may require more time and continuity than the evaluation period allowed. For these participants, the creation of a trusted relationship with a facilitator or a safe place to attend may itself represent an important program outcome.

Overall, the evidence from program member surveys points to SSC-funded programs functioning as sites where belonging, connection, and community are being established, reinforced, and maintained.

Program Manager Survey Findings

Program managers were asked about their degree of hands-on involvement in program delivery, the needs their program sought to address, the involvement of other local organisations, intended and observed outcomes, program evaluation, any changes made during program delivery, and basic demographic information. Key insights from this data are summarised in brief below.

Program involvement: Most participating program managers (82%) reported hands-on involvement in program delivery/facilitation, either delivering the program themselves (19%) or in collaboration with internal staff/external facilitators (63%). Overall, this points to a high degree of direct face-to-face engagement between the people managing SSC-funded programs and the community members taking part in them.

Community need: Program managers were asked to identify the community needs or gaps their program sought to address. Figure 3.6 (see p.32) illustrates word prevalence in the collated responses. Prominent terms included social, support, isolation, connection, inclusion, wellbeing, disability,

and health. Responses also reflected the diverse target communities of SSC-funded programs, including groups who face barriers to equality and social inclusion. More individual-level community needs were also evident, with references to confidence, resilience, independence, agency, belonging, and community participation.

Intended program outcomes: Surveys presented a list of 16 potential social outcomes and invited program managers to specify which target outcomes applied to their program. Embedded in this list were four sub-categories of social outcome, which broadly align with the four key concepts underpinning this study:

- **Sense of belonging**: acceptance, valued involvement, fit, social connection
- **Social connectedness**: social interaction, social support, social networks, relationships, absence of social isolation
- **Sense of community**: community ties, shared experiences, place connection, services/supports
- **Social capital** (green): skills/knowledge, confidence/autonomy, employment/ training, health and wellbeing.

Recognising the overlaps between these concepts and their core elements, the groupings are indicative, rather than exclusive, and respondents could select multiple options. The four sub-categories were not flagged visually in the survey form, but are grouped by colour in the results graph (see Figure 3.7, p.32).

'Reduce isolation' was the most common target outcome, cited by 94% of participating program managers. In order of frequency, other target outcomes were: 'Feel more connected to others' and 'Improve health and wellbeing' (both 88%); 'Increase social interaction', 'Strengthen ties with community', and 'Gain new skills or knowledge' (all 75%); 'Gain new peer/social supports' (69%); 'Access services/practical supports' (63%); 'Create shared experiences' and 'Increase confidence and autonomy' (both 56%), 'Feel more accepted' (50%); 'Feel more valued', 'Feel that they fit in', and 'Enhance connections to place' (all 44%); 'Build ongoing relationships' (38%), and 'Access employment/training' (19%).

Taken together, these responses affirm that all participating programs explicitly sought to strengthen core elements of all four social outcomes that are the focus of this study: sense of belonging, social connectedness, sense of community, and social capital.

Observed program benefits: Select insights from later-stage surveys are summarised below. The analysis draws on program managers' reported observations of benefits for program members, with a focus on the key social outcomes of belonging, connection, community, and social capital.

Survey respondents described their program members building social connections with each other, facilitators, and staff. These relationships developed over time, as sustained involvement enabled people to build familiarity and trust:

- 'As they proceed with the course they grow in their connection.'
- 'People that usually sat on the outskirts are now more comfortable being central.'
- 'Connection has grown to comfort in sharing experiences and life challenges.'

Respondents gave examples of program members bonding over shared activities, helping each other, forming friendships, and extending social connections beyond the program setting:

- 'Excursions to the zoo and other outdoor experiences were particularly special in creating shared experiences and happiness for the group.'
- 'One [program member] asked for wool and needle so that she could show another lady how to fix the hole in her jumper as they sat together.'
- 'Addresses were swapped between some of the [excursion] participants as they offered each other lifts home after the bus trip.'

Opportunities for social interaction were seen as especially valuable for more isolated program members, including older people and new migrants:

- 'A widow asked that she always be informed of our excursions, as it gets her out of the house/decreases her social isolation.'
- 'Having different cultural groups come together supports cross-cultural learning.'

Some programs also supported belonging and social capital indirectly, for example by enabling children to enjoy activities their families could not otherwise afford:

- 'Children can fit in with their more privileged peers as they are able to talk about what they did on the school holidays, like their peers.'

Respondents also gave examples of strengthened community connectedness, active contribution, and ties to place, as programs introduced people to local attractions or provided a gateway to other on-site activities:

- 'People who have come to community lunch are now coming to other programs or volunteering.'
- '[Participants were] introduced to new walking tracks plus Aboriginal cultural knowledge.'

Managers also described how programs linked members to other services, helped them navigate unfamiliar systems, and supported training, skills development, or employment outcomes:

- 'Being connected to our Neighbourhood House and [local partners] has opened up their access to all our services.'
- 'Hiring local women to run the [program] alongside a council counterpart provided training and employment opportunities.'
- 'The facilitator felt more valued [as a result of their experience] so has now applied for an Aboriginal Cultural Advisor position with [another organisation].'



Figure 3.6: Program manager surveys – community need for program



Figure 3.7: Program manager surveys – intended program outcomes

3.2 INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven program managers. These interviews were designed to complement the survey and workshop data through an in-depth exploration of program managers' experiences delivering SSC-funded programs in their Neighbourhood Houses or Centres. The interview findings provide insight into how SSC-funded programs are planned, delivered, and adapted in practice.

In this section, the terms 'social outcomes' and 'social wellbeing' are used as umbrella terms for the target outcomes that underpin this study: sense of belonging, social connectedness, sense of community, and social capital.

While the survey findings capture participant-reported and observed outcomes, the interviews help explain the program delivery conditions that program managers see as necessary for building stronger social outcomes.

The interviews were not designed to distinguish systematically between sense of belonging, social connectedness, sense of community, and social capital. Rather, they provide practical insights into the program conditions managers associated with these broader social outcomes.

The interviews formed part of a broader Master's thesis, so the resulting data was therefore extensive. The analysis presented in this section represents a condensed form of the interview findings, specifically tailored to the aims of this report.

Collectively, the target social outcomes were reflected in program managers' descriptions of participants feeling connected, supported, included, valued, confident, safe, and able to participate. Analysis of the interview data revealed three key themes that contributed to strengthening these social outcomes (see Figure 3.8, below):

- Strategic planning and program delivery
- Safe and welcoming spaces
- Empowering individuals

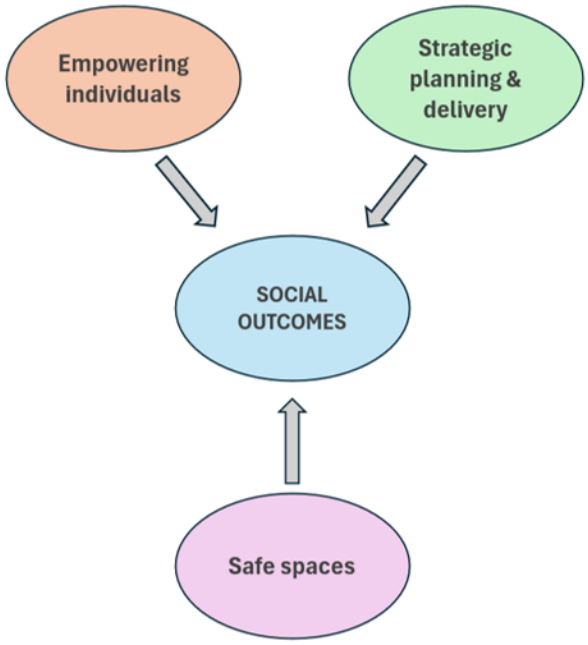


Figure 3.8: Relationship between interview themes

Theme 1: Strategic Planning and Delivery Are Central to Program Success

Developing local programs that aim to strengthen the target social outcomes required strategic planning to ensure they addressed the target group's specific needs, were appropriately staffed, and could remain sustainable after SSC funding ended.

In terms of target groups, program managers spoke of having carefully researched the need for their program. For some, this related to their own first-hand knowledge of the local community. For example:

- 'There's no-one we can refer [people] to in the Inner North... so it just got us thinking that maybe that was something that we could do.' (P3)

- ‘There are a lot of kids out there … they’re not suited to [sport], or… it’s not their passion.’ (P1)

Two further program managers described how the development of their programs arose directly from approaches by a community member or another local agency:

- ‘It was highlighted through a community member saying, “Oh, I was told I should do this.” And we’re, like, “Never heard of it, let’s see how we find out.”’ (P2)
- ‘They found a gap, and that’s why they were looking for a service to partner with them. That’s when we came along.’ (P7)

The value of this strategic planning was reinforced by feedback from program members that their programs were fit for purpose. For example:

- ‘A lot of them said they’ve just been looking for something like this.’ (P5)
- ‘I think the fact that we had various locations, and we tried to reduce that barrier of getting access [was] a big key to why it was successful.’ (P6*)*

It was noteworthy that program managers reported a downside to well-researched, targeted programs. Two interviewees mentioned the difficulty of having to turn interested participants away due to eligibility requirements or limitations on numbers. Another highlighted that although programs needed to be well planned, they also needed to be responsive and flexible to ensure program members’ needs were met:

- ‘Just being open to change. I think when people put in their grant [applications], it’s sort of like, “We’re doing this, this, and this”, and they’re not prepared to be open to change for fear of the funding body not approving… I think if you are connected to the program and keep the focus of the program there, if you need to change that program, just do it… if it betters the experience and opportunities for [program members], then do it.’ (P4)

Program managers all described how appropriate staffing was critical to the success of programs that seek to support participants’ wellbeing and foster positive social outcomes. One manager explained:

- ‘I would not trust this with anybody else. These are a very vulnerable group of [people], and the last thing I would want is to have a quantity unknown in there, or somebody that’s not suitable.’ (P6)

However, finding an appropriate program facilitator was often a time-consuming and challenging process:

- ‘We did have an issue… It was quite hard…to get a facilitator that was trauma-informed [and] has lived experience.’ (P5)
- ‘We had plenty of people put their hands up…. [But I didn’t] want someone that was just supervising. I wanted someone to lead, to teach, to collaborate with the kids. And that was…difficult. We advertised initially and didn’t get anyone… So, finding the right facilitator and not underestimating the importance of that… It will make or break a program.’ (P1)

Finally, program managers recognised the need for strategic planning to ensure programs could be sustained beyond the SSC Grant Program’s funding cycle, recognising that achieving the target social outcomes could not necessarily always be achieved in a short one-off program:

- ‘Sustainability is really important… You have to set [the program] up for sustainability at the start – retain the same method that is working, retain the same facilitator… [It’s] a different mindset if you’re…wanting a program, rather than a project.’ (P1)

This sustainability was achieved in a range of different ways. The interviewee above charged a small fee that was invested in maintaining the program. Another program manager partnered with another local organisation to ensure their program’s longer-term viability:

- ‘This program could not be done with just my funding. So, searching for collaborations and seeing what else is happening in the community that can …complement what we’re providing. Because there’s only so much funding, and funding is becoming more and more competitive now.’ (P7)

Despite this, one program manager recognised that their program would not continue after the SSC funding was expended. Several others described the challenges of trying to secure ongoing funding, and their resulting heavy reliance on volunteers. For example:

- ‘It’s a lot of work going for grants all the time… We wanted it to be a program… that could be sustainable, that we could offer on an ongoing basis. So I did quite a bit of research about what program that might be, and we decided a volunteer tutor was going to be the most sustainable way that we could run this program.’ (P3)

Theme 2: Safe and Welcoming Spaces Enable Trust and Participation

Interviewees all spoke of the need to provide safe spaces for program members to support their social wellbeing and improve social outcomes. This was related to both the underlying culture of Neighbourhood Houses and Centres, and the need to provide safety within the programs themselves.

Program managers highlighted that broader organisational culture and a shared commitment across organisational levels helped to create an environment where the big picture of strengthening social outcomes was embedded into the planning, implementation, and delivery of programs. For example, one person explained:

- ‘You have to let people have a sense of ownership over [the] things you delegate to them. If we all know what the big picture is, then let them have ownership and [bring] their recommendations on their part of it. Trust and ownership, and no ego. Let’s just all jump on board for the success.’ (P1)

One program manager emphasised how this inclusive culture needed to extend beyond paid staff, acknowledging the important contribution of volunteers:

- ‘We love our volunteers, but we also know they need to get something out of it. How do we make sure that that happens? And how do we make sure that we provide them with enough skills and support to do their role?’ (P2)

An overarching welcoming culture was seen as key to engaging community members and achieving social outcomes, from people’s very first contact with the centre:

- ‘Establishing warm connections… Like we always try, before people come to the first session, to have some conversation over email with them, just to see where they’re at.’ (P5)

Ultimately, this was also about promoting Neighbourhood Houses and Centres as places that enhance social wellbeing and support social outcomes:

- ‘I think it’s social connection… it’s a place to go and be, where you meet people and where people know your name.’ (P3)

At the program level specifically, interviewees argued that cultivating a safe space – enabling program members to express their concerns and seek guidance without fear of judgement – was critical to achieving social outcomes:

- ‘Having that nice safe space for them to just ask questions with no judgment, in a place [that’s] familiar, you know, nothing bad’s going to happen. I think that really plays a role in making them feel comfortable.’ (P2)

Several program managers emphasised how this extended to providing clear information and setting expectations, especially around confidentiality, to foster trust and ensure that program members felt safe and supported:

- ‘Really emphasising that we don’t want people’s [personal] details… They don’t have to have another door where they have to explain their situation, or another person where they have to justify what they’re doing.’ (P7)

Another interviewee went further, clearly articulating the link between creating these safe spaces and supporting program members’ wellbeing:

- ‘Overall, our aim is just to support the wellbeing of everybody. Make sure people feel validated and literally [have] a safe space to share.’ (P5)
- ‘I’ve had a couple of [program members] say it’s really good for community, connection… To feel understood…heard and listened to.’ (P4)

Theme 3: Empowering people supports confidence, skills and connection

The final theme was that programs that empower participants help to support social outcomes. This occurred through enabling program participants to have agency and be involved in decision-making about the activities they took part in, along with enabling the development of social and functional skills.

One important way in which SSC-funded programs empowered participants was by creating opportunities for them to contribute to program design, encouraging autonomy and active engagement. At the simplest level, for example, one interviewee (P1) explained that a children’s program enabled participants to exercise choice by choosing the themes and pieces for their projects. Another program manager described how their support group’s weekly content was guided by program members’ preferences and comfort levels:

- ‘It’s meeting them where they’re at… And seeing what they want to discuss… listening to what people want, instead of assuming or telling them. Actually asking people: “What suits you, what doesn’t suit you?” …Remembering that everyone’s the expert in their own lives and their own journey.’ (P5)

One interviewee clearly articulated the connection between agency and empowerment, explaining:

- ‘It empowers them to know that they’re influencing this program for their own benefit… or for the benefit of others.’ (P4)

Program managers also spoke about the social and functional skills people developed through program involvement. This was particularly evident in programs involving children, where interviewees highlighted that for children who did not engage with more mainstream social environments, such as organised sports, the program created alternative spaces for people to connect, participate, and develop social confidence:

- ‘A lot of them aren’t in sports, where they have that teamwork and make new friendships out of school… and that can be lonely. And they’re all making friends [in the program], and connecting and joining up, and talk to each other.’ (P1)
- ‘It’s not just about the skills they will learn, or the activities, it’s about those soft skills. Interacting for kids that are neurodivergent, gender diverse… They’ve got that opportunity [to] just feel normal, be themselves, and hang out in a place that’s safe.’ (P4)

Programs that focused on developing functional skills, such as reading and writing, enabled community members to build confidence in applying these skills beyond the program setting. For example:

- ‘Two students [have] done a trip to the library, registered for a library card, been introduced to some of the library staff… For both of them, I think libraries were pretty daunting places… because they’ve always felt “outside”… they didn’t belong there, or weren’t allowed there, because they couldn’t read.’ (P3)

One interesting finding was that building functional skills could extend beyond program members to include volunteers. Volunteers were community members or parents who frequent the Neighbourhood House and were offered opportunities to contribute by taking on volunteer roles. Program managers highlighted that volunteers could contribute to programs by drawing on their existing skills, as well as developing new ones:

- ‘There are often mums who might want to get into the workforce, or are looking for something to do, so the volunteering aspect also gives them an opportunity to give back to the community but also learn skills… It’s also providing training to these volunteers that they can put on a resume and say, “Hey, I’ve [gained] this experience.”’ (P7)

Ultimately, as program members became more empowered, they felt increasingly confident to engage in and explore social relationships. This fostered stronger social connections, contributing to a greater sense of belonging and community. For example:

- ‘By the end of it, they were greeting each other on the way in and talking on the way out… There was some nice connections between the group… You know, you’ve got things in common.’ (P2)
- ‘There’s camaraderie amongst the group because they are from the same cohort… That’s been really good.’ (P6)

In conclusion, the interviews with program managers highlighted many examples of programs helping to foster social outcomes. While the participating programs were all different, a common finding was that

building confidence and skills amongst often-excluded community members, and bringing together people with common experiences, helped to both empower them and enable social connections to develop. Critical factors included carefully researched programs targeted to need, appropriate staffing, and adequate funding. This was underpinned by the existing inclusive and supportive culture of Neighbourhood Houses and Centres, which was embedded into program design, enabling program members to feel safe, heard, and supported.

Challenges to program success included the time it takes to develop quality programs, securing appropriate staff/facilitators to run them, and the need to sustain programs beyond the SSC funding cycle.

Summary: Interview Findings

The three themes emerging from the interview data show that program managers understood successful SSC-funded programs as carefully targeted, relationally safe, and empowering for participants.

The interview findings suggest that SSC-funded programs support positive social outcomes not simply by providing activities, but by creating the conditions in which people can safely participate, build confidence, and form relationships and social ties. Across the three themes, program managers characterised successful programs as being grounded in local need, delivered by suitable and trusted facilitators, embedded within the welcoming culture of Neighbourhood Houses, and flexible enough to respond to members' circumstances.

These findings indicate that social outcomes are produced through a combination of program design and relational practice. Strategic planning helped to ensure that programs addressed real gaps and reached people who may not be well-served by existing services. Safe spaces enabled people to ask questions, share experiences, seek support, and engage without fear of judgement. Empowering approaches supported people to exercise choice, develop social and functional skills, contribute to program design and activity selection, and build confidence in their relationships with others.

Interview findings also show that the social value of SSC-funded programs relies on delivery conditions that require time, skill, and continuity. Program managers identified appropriate staffing, trust, volunteer support, partnerships, and planning for sustainability as crucial enablers of program success. They also identified challenges associated with short-term funding, recruitment of suitable facilitators, high demand, limits on participant numbers, and uncertainty about whether programs could continue beyond the grant period.

Overall, interview findings suggest that program managers see SSC-funded programs as most likely to contribute to social outcomes when their focus extends beyond short-term group activities. Programs function best as carefully designed, relational, and empowering community settings that allow participants to feel safe, develop confidence, connect with others, and participate more fully in community life.

The interview findings provide a delivery-focused account of how SSC-funded programs help to support social outcomes, from the perspective of program managers. The analysis in this section provides a basis for synthesis with findings from surveys and workshops (see next section).

3.3 WORKSHOP FINDINGS

Alongside surveys and interviews, this evaluation used a two-part STICKE workshop process to develop a systems-level understanding of the conditions that affect whether and how SSC-funded programs can build belonging, connection, community, and social capital. These collaborative workshops brought together program managers, facilitators, and other stakeholders with knowledge of SSC-funded programs and their community contexts.

The aim of the workshops was not to evaluate individual programs, but to understand the broader system in which SSC-funded programs operate. Participants were asked to identify factors that affect programs' ability to build belonging, connection, and community for program members and their wider communities. Through the STICKE process, workshop participants identified factors, mapped relationships between them, refined a shared systems map, and proposed action areas to strengthen future grant design, program delivery, and sector coordination.

The findings below summarise the workshop-derived systems analysis. A full synthesis of all study findings is addressed in the Discussion and Conclusions (p.47–57).

Systems View: How SSC-Funded Programs Build Connection and Belonging

The final systems map (Figure 3.9, overleaf) suggests that SSC-funded programs build connection and belonging through a wider set of enabling conditions, rather than via program activities alone. Workshop participants identified that outcomes such as belonging, social connectedness, sense of community, and social capital depend on the interaction between funding design, organisational capacity, workforce conditions, program design, participant wellbeing, and wider community context. The systems map was organised around several broad factor groups, summarised in Table 3.5 (below).

Factor group	Main factors identified
Funding and grant design	**Funding continuity,** funding adequacy, **grant flexibility**, overhead coverage, application burden, innovation pressure, funding complexity, grant support
Evaluation and evidence	Evaluation burden (staff and participants) impact evidence
Program design	**Community co-creation**, program innovation, accessibility
Organisational capacity	**Organisational trust**, **program continuity**, organisational sustainability, volunteer availability, crisis response, external service pressure, stakeholder engagement
Workforce	**Staff bandwidth**, workforce size and capability, staff support, trust in facilitators, vicarious trauma
Participant/ community context	**Participant wellbeing**, social cohesion, cost of living, resident stability, community diversity
Policy and stakeholder context	Political alignment, governmental policy stability, stakeholder engagement

Table 3.5: Factor groups in final systems map (with key factors marked in bold)

The workshops identified several key factors that are especially interlinked and influential: staff bandwidth, funding continuity, grant flexibility, participant wellbeing, organisational trust, community co-creation, and program continuity. These factors function as leverage points or bottlenecks within the system. When strengthened, they can support multiple other parts of the system. When constrained, they can limit programs' ability to build deeper forms of belonging, connection, and community.

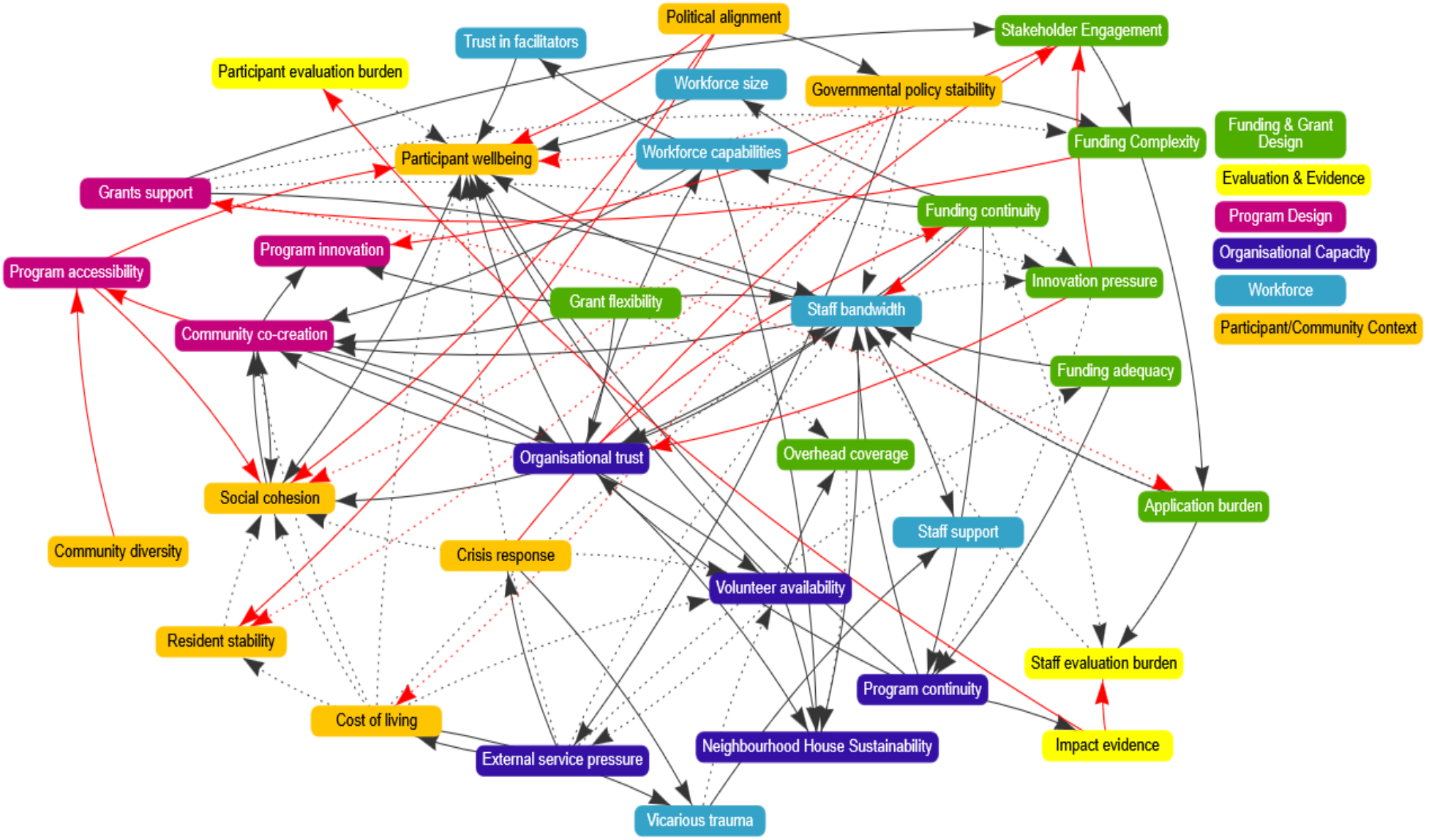


Figure 3.9: STICKE workshops: Final systems map – factors affecting ability of SSC-funded programs to build belonging, connection, community and social capital

One of the strongest workshop messages was that belonging is produced through relational continuity. Participants described SSC-funded programs as working through relationships: between program members, facilitators, Neighbourhood Houses, volunteers, local partners, and wider community networks. These relationships take time to form and deepen. As a result, factors such as funding continuity, program continuity, staff continuity, and organisational trust were seen as essential conditions for building lasting connection.

The final systems map (previous page) also shows that **grant design** shapes community outcomes indirectly. Funding amount, duration, flexibility, overhead coverage, and application and reporting requirements influence staff bandwidth, program continuity, and organisational trust. These factors then affect whether programs have the capacity to support social connection, participant wellbeing, community co-creation, and social cohesion.

Workshop findings highlight that the SSC Grant Program should not be understood simply as a mechanism for funding local activities. It also shapes the conditions under which Neighbourhood Houses can undertake vital relational, adaptive, and community-building work. Where the grant system supports continuity, flexibility, adequate resourcing, and proportionate reporting/evaluation, programs are more likely to build the relationships and trust that underpin belonging and social connection.

Constraints on Continuity, Trust and Relational Delivery

Workshop participants identified several constraints that can limit programs' ability to build lasting community connection and belonging. These constraints were not limited to program delivery. Many were situated within the broader funding, administrative, workforce, and community context surrounding local programs.

Short-term funding was a central constraint. Workshop participants linked limited funding continuity to reduced program continuity, weaker organisational trust, and difficulty demonstrating longer-term impact. Where programs end abruptly, program members may lose access to valued relationships, activities, and support. This can undermine the trust built between program members, facilitators, and the Neighbourhood House. Funding continuity was thus not simply an operational issue, but a condition for sustaining social outcomes.

Funding adequacy was another important constraint. Workshop participants noted that small grants can be valuable, but may not always reflect the true cost of delivery. Program costs can include staffing, coordination, administration, insurance, rent, utilities, evaluation, volunteer support, and other overheads. Where these costs are not adequately covered, the work may be absorbed by existing staff or organisational resources, placing further pressure on Neighbourhood Houses and Centres.

Grant application and reporting burden were also identified as constraints. Program managers linked the burdens of grant application, reporting, and evaluation to reduced staff bandwidth. Time spent preparing applications, managing reporting requirements, and acquitting grants is time unavailable for program delivery, relationship-building, co-creation, participant follow-up, or meaningful evaluation. This burden may be particularly significant with relatively small grants.

The workshops also distinguished between useful program innovation and innovation pressure. **Program innovation** was understood as positive adaptation to local needs. **Innovation pressure**, by contrast, was understood as the pressure to continually invent, repackage, or replace programs to meet expectations of novelty. Program managers saw this as potentially counterproductive when existing programs were already working, or when communities needed continuity rather than newness.

Staff bandwidth emerged as a major system bottleneck. Workshop participants described staff time, energy, and capacity as essential to deeper relational work. When staff are stretched by applications, reporting, short-term project cycles, crisis response, service pressure, and emotional labour, this reduces their capacity to co-create programs, build trust, support volunteers, and respond flexibly to participant needs.

The **wider community context** also placed pressure on local programs. Cost-of-living pressures, housing instability, crisis events, service gaps, and growing community need can increase demand on Neighbourhood Houses. As other parts of the service system become stretched, they may absorb additional pressure. Staff and volunteers get pulled into immediate response work, reducing capacity for preventative or community-building activities.

Workshop participants also identified **vicarious trauma** and **staff wellbeing as** important constraints. Where programs involve community members experiencing hardship, trauma, isolation, mental health challenges, or other complex needs, staff and volunteers may carry significant emotional load. Without adequate support, this can affect staff bandwidth, volunteer availability, and organisational sustainability.

Taken together, these constraints show that the capacity of SSC-funded programs to build belonging and connection is shaped by wider systems. Even well-designed local programs may struggle to achieve lasting social outcomes if they face short funding cycles, inadequate resourcing, high administrative burden, stretched workforce capacity, and growing community need.

Leverage Points for Stronger Program Design and Coordination

The workshops also identified leverage points where taking action could strengthen the conditions enabling SSC-funded programs to build belonging, connection, and community. These leverage points are drawn from the systems map and the action-priority exercise conducted in workshop two.

Funding continuity was one of the most important leverage points. Workshop participants connected funding continuity to program continuity, organisational trust, workforce continuity, and impact evidence. Longer or more reliable funding pathways would allow relationships to deepen, programs to mature, staff to retain knowledge, and organisations to demonstrate longer-term outcomes.

Grant flexibility was another key leverage point. Workshop participants saw flexibility as important because community needs can emerge or change during delivery. Flexible grant settings allow providers to adapt activities, staffing, budgets, and delivery modes as program members' needs become clearer. This can support program accessibility, community co-creation, trust, and program members' wellbeing.

Funding adequacy and **overhead coverage** were also important. Workshop participants identified that programs require adequate resources to cover the real costs of delivery, including indirect costs. Recognising overheads, insurance, staffing, and coordination costs would reduce the need for organisations to subsidise grant delivery through already stretched internal resources.

Fit-for-purpose evaluation was identified as a further leverage point. Program evaluation was seen as necessary for accountability, learning, and future funding. However, workshop participants cautioned that evaluation must be proportionate, accessible, and meaningful. Evaluation methods that are overly burdensome, repetitive, or poorly suited to program members' literacy, language, or cultural contexts may reduce trust and wellbeing. Better evaluation design could strengthen impact evidence while reducing burden on both program members and staff.

Community co-creation was another central leverage point. Workshop participants highlighted that co-creation is more than consultation. In the systems map, community co-creation was connected to organisational trust, social cohesion, participant wellbeing, and program innovation. When program members and local communities help to shape programs, this means programs are more likely to be relevant, accessible, and trusted.

Program accessibility and **community diversity** emerged more explicitly during the second workshop. Workshop participants identified the need to ensure that both programs and evaluation processes are culturally appropriate, understandable, and accessible to diverse communities, including First Nations participants, CALD communities, people with lower literacy, and others who may face participation barriers.

Stakeholder engagement and **ANHCA/ sector capacity** were also identified as important coordination points. Workshop participants saw value in stronger feedback channels between funders, grant administrators, Neighbourhood Houses and Centres, state peaks, and communities. Stronger sector coordination could support clearer grant guidance, better use of evaluation evidence, advocacy for future funding, and more responsive grant design.

Overall, the leverage points identified in the workshops suggest that improvements to the SSC Grant Program should focus not only on program content, but also on the enabling conditions around programs. Strengthening continuity, flexibility, accessibility, evaluation design, staff bandwidth, and sector coordination may increase programs' ability to build lasting belonging and connection.

Action Areas for Stronger Outcomes

In the second STICKE workshop, participants moved from analysing the systems map to identifying potential action areas. These action areas translated the identified leverage points into practical opportunities for action. The annotated action map in Figure 3.10 (overleaf) shows the parts of the system where workshop participants identified existing and further action areas.

The resulting action ideas were later sorted by the research team, using the feasibility and impact ratings recorded during the workshops. Actions were ranked into four categories: higher-priority actions, strategic or longer-term actions, quick wins or supporting actions, and lower priority actions (see Table 3.6, p.45).

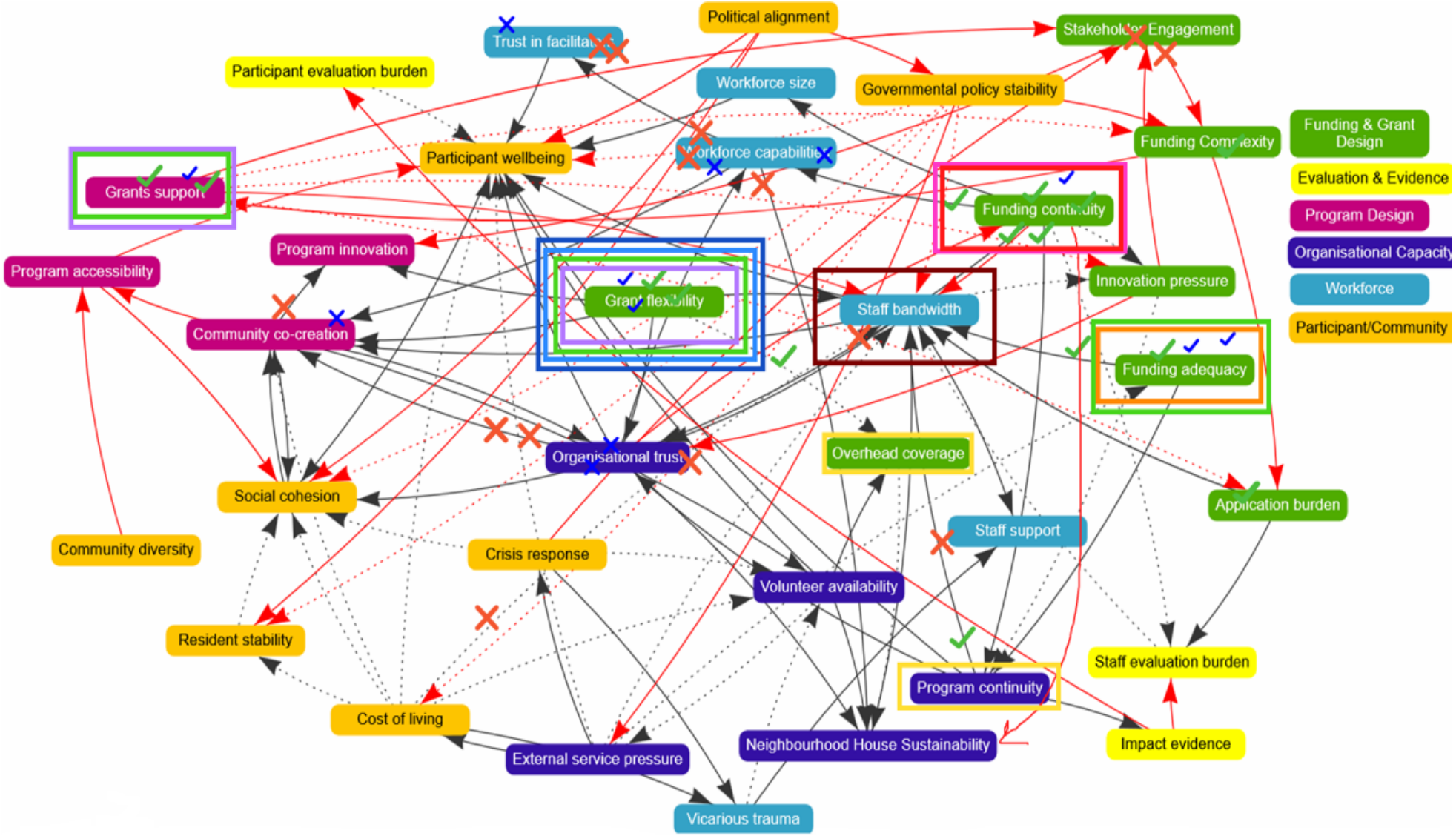


Figure 3.10: STICKE workshops: Annotated action map – existing and further action areas

The workshop-generated action items are outlined in the sections below, according to level of priority. Table 3.6 (below) shows the sorting logic used to rank the proposed actions into the four priority levels.

Feasibility	Impact	Priority Level
High	High	Higher-priority actions
Lower	High	Strategic or longer-term actions
High	Lower	Quick wins or supporting actions
Lower	Lower	Lower-priority actions

Table 3.6: Workshop-generated actions: sorting logic

Higher-Priority Actions

Higher-priority actions were rated as both high feasibility and high impact. These actions were:

- develop fit-for-purpose evaluation of program impact
- consider fewer, higher-value grants
- introduce a two-tiered funding model, with smaller quick-win grants and larger deeper-impact grants
- increase ANHCA and sector capacity
- expand grant flexibility, including flexibility for overheads, insurance, and shifting funds during delivery
- shorten applications and acquittal forms for smaller grants
- include lived experience input in grant assessment, decision-making, and evaluation frameworks.

These actions align closely with the major leverage points identified in the systems map. They respond to the need for adequate and flexible funding, proportionate evaluation, reduced administrative burden, lived experience input, and stronger supports for the sector.

Strategic/Longer-Term Actions

Strategic or longer-term actions were rated as lower feasibility but high impact. These actions may require additional funding, policy change, funder agreement, or more substantial redesign of the SSC grant model, but participants saw them as likely to make a significant difference. These actions were:

- allow successful existing programs to be re-funded
- explore two- or three-year funding for the same project model
- develop diverse methods of applying, such as written, video, or drawn applications
- allow a small budget proportion to cover program continuation
- include a grant funding proportion to support staff wellbeing.

These actions respond particularly to the system-level findings on continuity, accessibility, staff bandwidth, and relational delivery. They may be harder to implement than the higher-priority actions, but they address some of the deeper structural constraints identified in the workshops.

Quick Wins/Supporting Actions

Quick wins or supporting actions were rated as high feasibility but lower impact, or were seen as practical supports that could improve the grant process without necessarily transforming the system on their own. These actions were:

- provide more specific funding priorities
- share case studies of prior successful projects
- provide proportionate grant feedback.

These actions could help grant applicants better understand funder expectations, reduce wasted effort, and improve future applications. Grant feedback was rated as mixed feasibility but high impact, suggesting it may operate as a quick win if delivered in a light-touch way, or as a more strategic action if detailed individual feedback is provided.

Lower-Priority/Folded Actions

Only one action was rated lower feasibility and medium/lower impact:

- budget contingency and adaptability without funder negotiation or permissions.

Rather than treating this as a standalone action, this idea is best folded into the higher-priority action about grant flexibility. The underlying issue – the need for programs to adapt during delivery – was strongly supported by the systems map, but this specific mechanism was judged less feasible and impactful than broader grant flexibility.

Key Recommendation Domains

The Discussion and Conclusions section (see overleaf) presents an integrated analysis of findings from the workshops, surveys, and interviews. To support this analysis and inform the development of the report's final Recommendations, the workshop-generated actions were consolidated into four domains, as shown in Table 3.7 (opposite).

Domain	Workshop-generated action areas
Funding model and continuity	Higher-value or tiered grants; continuation pathways; multi-year funding; re-funding successful programs; program continuity support
Flexible and accessible grant design	Grant flexibility; overhead coverage; proportionate applications and acquittals; alternative application formats; grant guidance and feedback
Fit-for-purpose evaluation and evidence	Proportionate evaluation; story-based or relational evidence; lived experience in assessment and evaluation; accessible evaluation methods
Delivery capacity and sector support	Staff bandwidth and wellbeing; relational delivery costs; ANHCA capacity; stakeholder engagement and advocacy

Table 3.7: Workshops – key action domains

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter brings together evidence from the surveys, interviews, and collaborative STICKE workshops to interpret what the evaluation shows about the social impacts of the Supporting Stronger Communities (SSC) Grant Program. Here, the emphasis shifts from reporting separate findings to considering what they mean collectively: whether the intended social outcomes are being supported, what those outcomes look like in everyday experience, how they appear to be produced, where effects are uneven or uncertain, and what wider conditions shape program impact.

The study's four key concepts provide the interpretive framework for this section:

- **Sense of belonging** concerns whether people feel accepted, valued, included, and connected.
- **Social connectedness** concerns the presence, quality, and range of desired social relationships and supports in a person's life.
- **Sense of community** concerns people's identification with, and perceived membership of, a wider group or community.
- **Social capital** concerns the resources, supports, relationships, trust, reciprocity, and shared understandings embedded within social networks.

In practice, these concepts overlap substantially. The findings suggest that these target social outcomes are best understood not as four separate endpoints, but as interacting dimensions of stronger social relationships and community participation.

4.1 IS THE SSC GRANT PROGRAM ACHIEVING ITS INTENDED SOCIAL OUTCOMES?

Taken together, the evidence supports the conclusion that SSC-funded programs are contributing to the intended social outcomes, with the strength and form of evidence varying across the four domains.

Social connectedness is the clearest impact area. There is also persuasive evidence that programs reinforce sense of belonging and sense of community. Evidence relating to social capital is necessarily more indicative, because the evaluation did not set out to measure this complex construct, or attempt to assess longer-term changes in broader social networks.

The written survey evidence provides a strong picture of perceived program value. Program members repeatedly described feeling welcomed, accepted, valued, and included as participants; making friends and increasing their social interactions; receiving practical and emotional support; learning and sharing knowledge; and contributing to the group. This is reinforced by the broader survey data on program member benefits: among later-stage respondents, 89% reported gaining new information or knowledge, 81% accessed useful resources, and 83% made new social connections through program involvement.

For **sense of belonging,** program members' first-hand accounts of program experiences closely reflected the concept's core elements of acceptance, valued involvement, fit, and social connection (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995; Lee & Robbins, 1995). A striking pattern was the frequency with which people located sense of belonging within the program itself: the

group, facilitator, or Neighbourhood House became a setting in which participants felt recognised, welcomed, and included.

Social connectedness was the most evident target outcome, manifesting through new friendships, regular social interactions, peer support, expanded personal networks, and valued relationships with staff, facilitators, and volunteers. These program-based ties reinforced a sense of feeling supported, cared for, and valued. For people who otherwise had limited social contact, these opportunities could be especially significant, helping to counteract social isolation. Together, these descriptions closely reflect established definitions of social connectedness (CDC, 2024; Tough, Siegrist & Fekete, 2017; Lamblin et al., 2017).

Sense of community outcomes emerged through shared experiences, a sense of group membership, feeling valued within the program group, accessing resources and support, and place-based connections, including positive identification with the Neighbourhood House or Community Centre. In some cases, the program group itself appeared to function as a meaningful community, rather than simply a pathway into an existing one. These reports align with core elements of sense of community (Obst et al., 2002; McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Evidence relevant to **social capital** impacts included expanded personal networks, information-sharing, reciprocal assistance, volunteering, trust, skills development, cultural exchange, and links to services, training, or other organisations. Although these patterns should not be interpreted as a direct measurement of social capital, they are consistent with key elements of social-capital formation (Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2015; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

Program manager survey data provides a complementary perspective. Of 16 managers surveyed, 15 identified reducing social isolation as an intended program outcome, 14 cited feeling more connected to others, 14 selected improved health and wellbeing, 12 listed increased social interaction, 12 identified strengthened ties with community, and 12 cited gaining new skills or knowledge. These intentions do not demonstrate program impact by themselves, but they show strong alignment between the SSC Grant Program's social aims, local program design, and the outcomes subsequently described by program members.

These qualitative conclusions need to be read alongside the validated-scale results. Belonging and community-connectedness scores were high at both survey stages and did not show a statistically reliable increase over time. However, this does not suggest an absence of program benefit, because the survey rounds were not matched longitudinal observations; most respondents had already had substantial program exposure before the first survey; initial scores were very high; and later-stage response numbers were smaller. Data from the validated scales thus cannot provide a meaningful estimate of change from a genuine pre-program baseline.

Overall, there is clear evidence for the proposition that SSC-funded programs establish, reinforce, and sustain the conditions for stronger belonging and connection. The programs also appear to create access to relationships, resources, and opportunities consistent with stronger sense of community and social capital. While participant experiences were not uniform, the overall picture is that the SSC Grant program is helping to support the target social outcomes.

4.2 WHAT DO THESE OUTCOMES LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

The target social outcomes were experienced by participants in concrete, overlapping ways. Rather than appearing as separate constructs, these four outcomes – belonging, connectedness, community, and social capital – were woven through ordinary interactions: growing more comfortable with other group members, sharing an activity, learning from someone else, being able to ask for help, offering help in return, or coming to see a local centre as 'our' place, rather than simply a service location.

In practice, **sense of belonging** meant feeling welcomed and accepted, valued and listened to, included and appreciated, and increasingly comfortable in the presence of others. Repeated participation could create familiarity and a recognised role within the group. Several responses suggested a shift from seeing oneself as an attendee among strangers towards identifying as a member of a shared group. Belonging could also become place-based, through positive attachment to the Neighbourhood House or Community Centre and, in some accounts, to the wider local area or community.

Social connectedness was visible in meeting new people, making friends, talking regularly with others, and building relationships around common interests, similar life circumstances, or shared experiences and activities. Program members learned from each other, tried new things together, exchanged cultural knowledge, and developed mutual peer support. Connections with facilitators, staff, and volunteers were also important. For some participants, increased confidence in social interaction and reduced isolation were themselves significant outcomes.

Sense of community developed through these repeated connections. Shared activities helped create emotional bonds, while group membership provided access to social and practical supports. Program members described feeling that they mattered, that their contributions were valued, and that they had a place within the group. In some cases, connections extended beyond immediate activities: participants joined other centre programs, continued friendships outside sessions, returned as volunteers, connected with neighbours, or linked with local services. These patterns reflect the membership, mattering, needs fulfilment, and shared emotional connection described by McMillan and Chavis (1986).

Indications of **social capital** were similarly grounded in everyday practices. Program members expanded their social networks, exchanged information and knowledge, shared skills and cultural experiences, offered and received support, and gained access to services, training, information, resources, and other opportunities. Along with bonds formed within the immediate group, there were indications of bridging links to other organisations and wider networks. The evaluation could not ascertain how durable those connections were after program completion.

Outcomes also reinforced one another. A social interaction could become a friendship; friendship could foster belonging; belonging could support group identification; group membership could provide access to information and support; and helping others could deepen trust and reciprocity. This interdependence helps explain why a single program experience can produce several forms of social value at once.

A further implication is that 'community' was not always something external to the funded activity. For some participants, especially those with limited existing networks, the program group and Neighbourhood House became an immediate community in their own right. This distinction matters: connection to a bounded, trusted group may be an important outcome before – and potentially a pathway towards – stronger identification and connection with the wider local community.

4.3 HOW DOES THE PROGRAM SUPPORT THESE OUTCOMES?

The evaluation was not designed to compare program categories or activity types. However, it does reveal recurring characteristics that evidently support stronger social outcomes across otherwise diverse programs.

What Drives Stronger Outcomes?

One of the clearest patterns is the importance of the **social environment.** Members repeatedly described programs as friendly, welcoming, accepting, supportive, and non-judgemental. Feeling safe enough to attend, speak, ask questions, make mistakes, and gradually become known appears to be an important condition for deeper connection. **Skilled facilitators, staff, and volunteers** were central to creating this environment. Their role extended beyond delivering content to welcoming participants, noticing needs, supporting interactions, adapting activities, and creating opportunities for contribution.

Repeated interactions also mattered. Friendship, familiarity, trust, and mutual support rarely arise from one-off contact. Programs gave people a recurring reason to be in the same place, encounter the same people, and accumulate shared experiences. This was particularly valuable for participants whose everyday lives offered limited opportunities for social contact.

Peer-to-peer interaction was equally important. Program members learned from one another, exchanged practical and cultural knowledge, offered encouragement and assistance, and sometimes extended relationships beyond formal sessions. This reciprocity shifts people from being passive recipients of a service towards being active members of a group. Being able to contribute one's knowledge, skills, time, or care can itself strengthen feelings of value, mattering, and belonging.

Local responsiveness and **participant agency** were also evident. Programs were designed around identified community needs and could often adapt as members' interests or barriers became clearer. The STICKE workshops similarly identified **community co-creation**, **program accessibility**, **organisational trust,** and **grant flexibility** as important leverage points. Where program members could influence activities or contribute to program direction, this appeared to increase relevance, ownership, and engagement.

Practical and social benefits frequently reinforced each other. People may attend a program to learn a skill, access a service, obtain information, receive support, or take part in an enjoyable activity; relationships develop alongside those benefits. Conversely, **trust in staff and peers** can make it easier to ask for practical help or try something unfamiliar.

Learning illustrates this interplay of practical and social benefits. Program members valued informal learning, structured skills

development, cultural exchange, excursions, and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing. Learning together created conversation, novelty, manageable challenge, and shared achievement, while programs focused on more formal skills development could also reduce barriers to social and economic participation, improve autonomy, broaden social networks, or open pathways to training and employment.

Across these varied settings, stronger reported experiences were thus associated less with particular program types or activities than with accessible entry points, repeated interactions, trusted facilitation, welcoming atmospheres, peer relationships, meaningful participation, opportunities to contribute, practical usefulness, and flexibility to respond to local needs.

A Plausible Mechanism of Change

Across the evidence, a plausible pathway can be identified through which many SSC-funded programs may strengthen belonging and connection. Accessible, useful, or meaningful activities provide a reason to attend; repeated attendance fosters interaction; over time, interaction builds familiarity; and familiarity can reduce social uncertainty and allow trust to develop. Trust creates the conditions for friendship, reciprocity, practical and emotional support, confidence, and greater willingness to contribute. In turn, these relationships can then strengthen belonging and identification with the group, the Neighbourhood House and, potentially, the wider community.

This pathway can be summarised as follows: accessible or meaningful activity > repeated interaction > familiarity and trust > friendship, support, and reciprocity > belonging and connection (see Figure 4.1, below). This is an interpretive model, rather than a causal sequence proven by the evaluation, and the relationships are multidirectional. Nevertheless, it is consistent with program members' accounts and with STICKE workshop findings concerning accessibility, community co-creation, trust, participant wellbeing, staff capacity, and continuity.

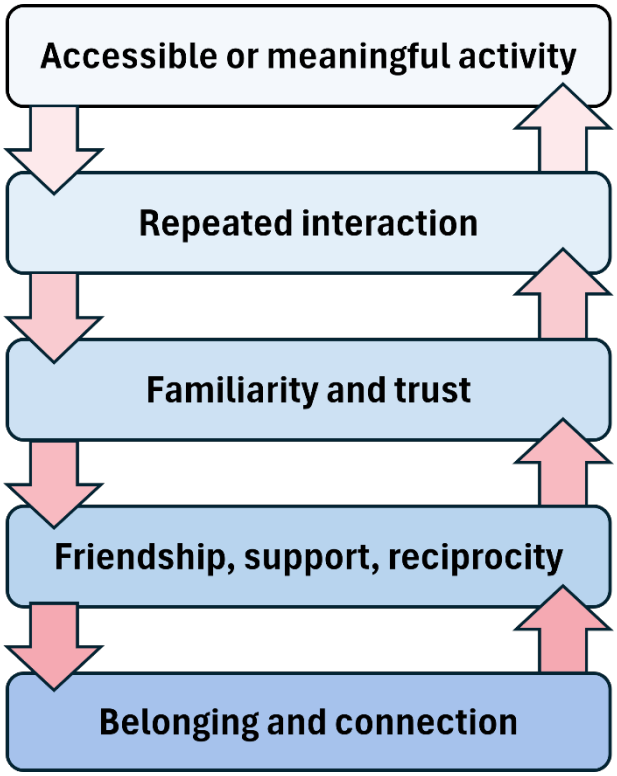


Figure 4.1: Plausible mechanism of change

Notably, the study findings also suggest that social connectedness can operate as a foundational program outcome, providing a crucial building block for other social outcomes to develop. Initial interactions and new social ties can create the conditions for belonging; belonging can strengthen identification with the group or community; and these processes can enable access to the resources, reciprocity, participation, trust, and networks associated with social capital. The reverse can also occur: practical help or opportunities to contribute can help to build trust and deepen belonging.

An important implication is that programs do not need to be framed explicitly as 'social connection' interventions to successfully build these connections. A useful, enjoyable, or meaningful shared purpose can provide a less pressured route into social participation, particularly for people who may be reluctant to join an activity solely to make friends or to address isolation.

Activities Matter – in More Than One Way

The idea of the program activity as a vehicle for connection is useful, but should not be overstated. Across many surveyed programs, a wide range of activities created the context for interactions and relationships to develop. In these settings, the social processes generated around the shared experience may be as important as the activity itself.

However, the substantive program activity often has important value in its own right. Digital or language education can build capabilities and reduce barriers to participation. Excursions can address inequalities in access to places and cultural experiences. Food programs can reduce food insecurity and improve health while bringing people together. Service-navigation activities can connect people with housing, health, employment, or other essential supports. Specialist programs responding to bereavement, family violence, or other forms of trauma have important purposes that extend well beyond the bounds of incidental contexts for social interaction.

Importantly, the evidence from this evaluation suggests that SSC-funded programs often achieve multiple outcomes simultaneously. A practical, educational, cultural, therapeutic, or material benefit can coexist with social connection, and the two can reinforce one another. This is a key strength of locally responsive community programming: the same intervention can respond to immediate need, build capabilities, and also create new social ties.

For these reasons, the evaluation does not attempt to rank activity types, such as arts, recreation, cooking, cultural experiences, learning activities, excursions, employment support, or service access. It did not seek to document the full range of activities across all funded programs and was not designed as a comparative effectiveness study. Instead, it identifies a set of cross-cutting characteristics associated with positive program experiences, as detailed below.

Program Characteristics Linked to Stronger Social Outcomes

Taken together, the evaluation suggests that positive social outcomes were most consistently associated with programs that shared several cross-cutting characteristics. These should not be read as a checklist for a single model of success, but as recurring features that appeared to support belonging, connection, participation, community, and access to wider resources across otherwise diverse programs.

The following program characteristics were associated with stronger social outcomes:

- **Responds to an identified local need** and is tailored to the specific community and participant group.
- **Creates welcoming, safe and accessible environments** in which members feel accepted, valued, and comfortable taking part.
- **Provides skilled and trusted facilitators and staff** who can build relationships and respond sensitively to members' needs and preferences.

- **Offers repeated opportunities for meaningful interaction**, enabling familiarity, trust, and relationships to develop over time.
- **Encourages active participation and contribution**, rather than positioning people solely as recipients of support.
- **Supports peer-to-peer interaction and reciprocity**, including sharing skills, knowledge, culture, encouragement, and practical support.
- **Combines practical and social value**, for example through learning, useful resources, service access, or meaningful activities that also create opportunities for connection.
- **Remains flexible and responsive**, allowing program delivery and activities to adapt as members' needs, wishes, and circumstances become clearer.
- **Creates opportunities for connection beyond the immediate activity**, including links to other programs, services, volunteering, training, local places, or wider community networks.
- **Has enabling conditions:** the program characteristics outlined above are more likely to be sustained where programs have sufficient continuity, staffing, and organisational capacity for relationships and trust to develop over time.

4.4 WHAT CONSTRAINS OR LIMITS IMPACT?

Positive overall findings should not obscure uneven participant experiences or the constraints under which these community-based programs operate. Some limits reflect participants' circumstances, some arise from program and funding conditions, and others concern what the evaluation itself was able to establish.

Outcomes Are Not Uniform

Although average belonging and connectedness were high, a meaningful minority of program members described weaker relationships with their wider community. Around one-fifth of first-round survey respondents said they did not feel accepted, while roughly one in eight reported feeling disregarded, distant from others, or unable to fit in. A smaller number described experiencing profound isolation, rejection, and disconnection.

These responses matter because SSC-funded programs intentionally work with groups experiencing inequality, disadvantage, or exclusion. Lower belonging and connection may therefore reflect the circumstances that made a program necessary, rather than any delivery deficits. Survey data included people recently released from prison who described severe social isolation and difficulty re-entering community life; their starting point was markedly different from that of respondents who already had strong local networks.

For people experiencing entrenched exclusion, trauma, or instability, meaningful social change may require more time than the program or evaluation window allowed. A person can begin to trust a facilitator, feel safe in a group, or make one new connection while still reporting low belonging to the wider community. In this context, a trusted relationship or reliable place to attend may itself represent a significant early outcome.

Survey responses suggest that programs were providing benefits for some more isolated participants, including new social contacts, practical supports, and reduced isolation. Outcomes should therefore be interpreted relative to participants'

circumstances, rather than assuming the same rate or magnitude of change for all groups. Subgroups were too small to support definitive demographic comparisons, so these patterns remain indicative.

Program Diversity and Limits to Generalisation

The SSC portfolio is highly diverse. Across the 26 local programs that received SSC grants in 2025, 20 contributed to at least one component of this evaluation, while program member surveys captured participants from eight programs. Those eight programs provided rich evidence across a genuinely varied set of settings, but do not represent the full breadth of the funded portfolio.

Funded programs differed in target groups, participant needs, delivery models, duration, scale, and substantive focus. Some emphasised skills development; others practical or material support; others recreational, creative, cultural, or social participation; and some addressed highly sensitive or trauma-related needs. Many combined several of these functions. Six programs were ineligible to survey members because of age restrictions or participant vulnerability, while others were unable to administer member surveys because of staffing, timing, or resource constraints.

This evaluation identifies recurring patterns across participating programs, but it does not imply that every SSC-funded program works in the same way. As such, the resulting Recommendations are framed broadly enough to serve the full portfolio, while preserving the local tailoring that is clearly an important feature of the funding model.

Study Boundaries and Strength of Claims

In this study, the most important quantitative limitation is that the program member surveys were not matched longitudinal observations. Participants did not have identifiers allowing responses to be reliably linked across time, and fewer than 29% of later-stage respondents were confirmed, via separately stored consent records, as having taken part in the earlier survey. Differences between survey rounds therefore cannot be interpreted as individual-level change.

There was also no consistent pre-program baseline. Around three-quarters of first-round survey respondents came from programs that had already been operating for several months. The high initial scores may thus already reflect early-stage program benefits. In addition, 44% of respondents with a valid earlier-stage belonging score recorded the maximum possible score of five, leaving no room for measurable improvement in the subsequent survey round. Smaller later-stage samples further limited sensitivity to subtle differences. The validated scale results should thus be read as descriptive, rather than an indication of pre/post program effects.

The qualitative and perceived-benefit data provide a different form of evidence, by documenting how program members themselves experienced their involvement in a diverse range of programs.

The use of surveys rather than interviews to collect data from program members reflects the evaluation's scope and resources. Surveys allowed comparable evidence to be efficiently gathered from a larger number of participants across geographically dispersed programs while keeping the timeframe relatively short for respondents. Interviews

with program members would have generated greater depth from a much smaller number of people. This method would have required substantially more resources for recruitment, transcription, and analysis, while yielding a far narrower range of program experiences from what was a highly diverse field. Instead, the program manager interviews and STICKE workshops were used to add explanatory and systems-level depth to the evaluation.

More generally, this was not a randomised controlled trial or comparative effectiveness study. Local programs were tailored to different communities, and many external factors can influence belonging and connection. The evaluation cannot attribute all observed outcomes exclusively to SSC funding, identify one program or activity type as causally superior, or establish how long benefits persisted. Social capital was inferred from relevant indicators, rather than directly measured.

Claims arising from the analysis are therefore about recurring patterns, program members' reported experiences, perceived benefits, convergence across evidence sources, and plausible mechanisms, rather than experimentally established causation.

4.5 WHAT FACTORS ENABLE SUCCESS?

The STICKE workshops extended the program-level findings by providing systems-level insights. The workshop findings demonstrate that community outcomes are shaped by a wider system of funding, organisational, and workforce conditions. Workshop participants identified a set of enabling factors that support the target social outcomes. Key enabling factors are set out below. The central lesson is that SSC-funded programs do not produce belonging and connection through activities alone. Their ability to do so depends on whether organisations have the time, continuity, flexibility, staffing, and trust required for relational, adaptive community work.

Relational continuity is particularly important to achieving the target social outcomes. The qualitative evidence shows that connection is built through repeated interaction: people become more familiar, relationships deepen, and trust builds. The systems map (p.40) highlights how funding continuity can support this process indirectly by enabling staff and program continuity, along with organisational stability. Conversely, when a program ends just as relationships have become established, this may interrupt a newly created social network and trusted point of contact. Funding duration is thus not only an administrative choice; it can affect the conditions under which social outcomes are sustained.

Staff capability and bandwidth form another critical part of the system. Skilled facilitators and staff create welcoming conditions, recognise barriers, encourage peer interaction, respond to distress, make referrals, and adapt activities. Yet workshop participants identified staff bandwidth as a major bottleneck. Funding applications, reporting requirements, short project cycles, crisis response demands, service pressure, and emotional labour can reduce the time available for this relational work. Program manager evidence also highlighted staff recruitment and retention difficulties in some programs, especially where specialist facilitator skills were required.

The outcomes observed in this evaluation are therefore not produced by grant dollars alone. They also draw on accumulated

organisational knowledge, established community trust, staff expertise, volunteer effort, participant and community input, existing infrastructure, and relationships developed over time. Funded organisations appear able to generate substantial social value from relatively modest grants partly because they leverage these existing assets. At the same time, expecting organisations to absorb unfunded coordination, relational labour, and overheads risks weakening the capacity on which the model depends.

Flexibility is similarly connected to social outcomes. Program members' needs and circumstances can change during delivery. Programs able to adjust activities, delivery modes, or resource use can respond to what is learned as the program unfolds. The workshops identified grant flexibility and community co-creation as leverage points, while program member findings indicate that relevance, accessibility, and opportunities to contribute are closely tied to positive experiences. Overly rigid settings could thus undermine one of SSC's evident strengths: its support for locally tailored responses.

Organisational trust is another enabling factor. Program members often described their Neighbourhood House or Community Centre as a welcoming and trusted place, not simply a venue. For people who distrust formal systems, feel socially excluded, or face practical or social barriers, a familiar local organisation can lower the threshold for participation and connection to further support. Co-creation reinforces this dynamic: participants benefit not only from receiving support, but from shaping activities, sharing knowledge, and helping others. This can build agency, reciprocity, enjoyment, and program fit.

Finally, the systems analysis shows that **grant design** has downstream social consequences. Funding amount and duration, overhead coverage, application and acquittal requirements, evaluation burden, innovation expectations, and sector support all affect staff time and organisational capacity. In turn, these conditions shape continuity, accessibility, responsiveness, and the quality of relationships. The SSC Grant Program should thus be understood as more than a mechanism for funding local activities: it also helps to create – or potentially constrain – the conditions in which trusted community organisations can undertake the sustained relational work that is vital to program success.

The systems map co-created through the workshops also helps explain why apparently separate implementation issues should not be treated in isolation. Funding continuity, grant flexibility, staff bandwidth, participant wellbeing, organisational trust, community co-creation, and program continuity were all identified as influential and interconnected factors. Wider pressures – including cost-of-living stress, service gaps, crisis demand, and volunteer capacity – can further increase the load on community-based organisations.

Likewise, pressure to demonstrate continual 'innovation' may work against continuity where an existing program is already meeting established needs. The practical implication is to focus on leverage points that strengthen several parts of the system at once, rather than expecting individual programs to compensate for structural constraints through goodwill or adaptation alone.

4.6 IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE FUNDING ROUNDS

Several implications follow from this analysis. First, **continuity should be valued alongside innovation.** Where a program responds to continuing need and has established trusted relationships, allowing effective work to continue may be more valuable than requiring a new concept or adjusted approach. Second, grant design should recognise that it is not only activities being funded, but also **the relational capacity required to deliver programs well**: skilled staff and facilitators, participant follow-up, volunteer support, coordination, adaptability, and time to build trust.

Third, **local flexibility should remain a defining feature of the model**. The evaluation does not identify any superior category of activity. It points instead to locally relevant programs that can combine practical and social value, foster meaningful participation, and adapt as circumstances change. Funding and reporting arrangements should support rather than narrow this capacity for local responsiveness.

Fourth, **evaluation and reporting should be proportionate** to grant size and organisational circumstances. Short quantitative tools can contribute useful insights, but the current study demonstrates the value of qualitative accounts, observational evidence, and contextual information for understanding belonging, social connection, sense of community, and social capital. Future reporting requirements should be accessible across language, literacy, and cultural contexts and should not draw disproportionate staff time away from program delivery.

This approach also means **avoiding an overly narrow definition of success.** For programs working with participants facing substantial exclusion, early outcomes such as regular attendance, trust in a facilitator, one new friendship, or engaging with supports may be meaningful and valuable steps, even when broader community-belonging may remain unchanged. Evaluation should be capable of recognising these interim-stage and relational outcomes.

Finally, **the wider sector infrastructure matters.** In working together, ANHCA, state and territory peaks, funders, and local organisations can strengthen program impact by sharing learning, supporting grant applicants, coordinating evidence, and communicating emerging needs.

The Recommendations that follow translate these principles into practical options for future SSC funding rounds.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Recommendations outlined below are intended to strengthen the conditions under which SSC-funded programs can build belonging, social connectedness, sense of community, and social capital. They do not privilege specific program categories or activity types. Instead, they highlight the more transferable features of effective program delivery, which include continuity, flexibility, local relevance, accessibility, skilled facilitation, trusted relationships, and opportunities for meaningful participation.

5.1 FUNDING AND CONTINUITY

Recommendation 1: Create pathways for successful programs to continue

Where a funded program demonstrates continuing community need, strong participation, and credible evidence of value, SSC should provide a pathway for funding continuity, rather than requiring organisations to continually replace or reframe established programs with new concepts. Options could include allowing successful programs to reapply for the same grant or an adapted model, or providing two- or three-year funding where the nature of the work requires longer-term relationship building. This would not mean automatic renewal: funding continuity decisions should be evidence-based and responsive to changing need. However, this evaluation found that connection, trust, friendship, belonging, and group identity develop through repeated interactions. Funding discontinuity can interrupt those processes just as they become established. A stronger continuation pathway would support both operational stability and the relational conditions that underpin the SSC Grant Program's intended social outcomes.

Recommendation 2: Develop a more differentiated funding model

Consider whether a single grant scale is the best fit for the wide range of needs SSC-funded programs address. A tiered model could combine smaller grants for discrete or rapid-response initiatives with larger or longer-term grants for programs requiring sustained relational, capability-building, or community development work. The workshops also raised the possibility of fewer, higher-value grants where this would enable deeper impact. In addition, a small, low-barrier rapid-response stream could help organisations manage unexpected needs that emerge during program delivery, such as unanticipated demand, staffing disruption, or loss of partner support. Any tiered model should avoid making the system more administratively complex; application and reporting expectations should remain proportionate to the size and purpose of each funding tier.

Recommendation 3: Recognise the full cost and professional skill of delivery

Grant budgets should more explicitly recognise the real costs of delivering high-quality community programs. These include staff and facilitator time, coordination, administration, insurance, venue and other overheads, recruitment, volunteer support, participant follow-up and, where relevant, staff wellbeing support for work involving trauma or complex needs. The evaluation also found that staff capability is central to program quality: skilled facilitators create welcoming environments, manage group dynamics, recognise individual needs, encourage participation, and connect people with further support. Funding settings should therefore support the recruitment, retention, and reasonable remuneration of

appropriately skilled staff, rather than assuming that relational and coordination work can be absorbed by existing organisational resources. Recognising these costs would help protect the organisational capacity on which SSC outcomes depend.

5.2 FLEXIBLE AND ACCESSIBLE GRANTS

Recommendation 4: Preserve flexibility during program delivery

The SSC Grant Program should preserve, and where possible strengthen, the capacity of funding recipients to adapt program delivery as participant and community needs emerge or evolve. Reasonable changes to program activities, delivery methods, staffing, or budget allocations should be possible without undue negotiation or approval processes, provided the program remains aligned with its agreed purpose. This evaluation found that local responsiveness and community-informed adaptation are important to program accessibility, relevance, and trust. Flexibility is therefore not simply an administrative convenience, but an innate part of the delivery model. Setting clear parameters for permitted changes could preserve accountability while enabling programs to respond to emerging needs and opportunities.

Recommendation 5: Ensure application, reporting and acquittal requirements are proportionate

Review application, reporting, and acquittal requirements to ensure they are proportionate to grant value and do not unnecessarily reduce staff capacity for program delivery. Workshop participants linked application and evaluation burden to staff bandwidth, particularly for small organisations managing multiple funding streams. This does not imply that existing requirements are excessive, and accountability remains important. Rather, the evidentiary burden should be commensurate with the size and risk of the grant. Shorter forms for smaller grants, clear guidance, re-using previously supplied information, and streamlining acquittal processes could reduce duplication while preserving the information required for governance and learning.

Recommendation 6: Maintain accessible and community-informed grant processes

Continue to improve grant accessibility through clear funding priorities, plain-language guidance, examples of successful projects, and proportionate applicant feedback. Alternative application formats, such as video or other supported options, could be considered where they reduce access barriers. Community and lived-experience input can also strengthen grant assessment, program design, and evaluation by helping funders understand how planned formats and activities fit the needs of target participants. However, this work should be purposeful and properly resourced; it should not be an extra unpaid expectation placed on community members or reduce available funds for program delivery without clear benefits. The aim should be a grant process that draws on community knowledge while remaining simple and equitable.

5.3 CAPACITY, COORDINATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

Recommendation 7: Explicitly support the relational work through which program outcomes are achieved

SSC funding and guidance should recognise relationship-building as core program delivery work. This evaluation found that positive social outcomes depend on staff

and facilitators investing time in welcoming program members, building trust, encouraging peer interactions, following up needs, supporting volunteers, adapting activities, and creating opportunities for people to contribute. These tasks may be less visible than the funded activities, but they are central to how belonging and connection develop. Grant budgets, timelines, and reporting expectations should therefore allow sufficient capacity for this relational work. This is particularly important for programs working with participants who are isolated, experiencing trauma, or facing multiple barriers to participation.

Recommendation 8: Preserve locally responsive, participatory program design

Future SSC grant rounds should continue to fund a diverse range of locally designed responses. This evaluation does not suggest that certain types of programs or activities are more effective than others. Rather, it shows that stronger reported outcomes are associated with features that can occur across diverse programs and activities. These features include identified local need, accessibility, repeated meaningful interactions, skilled facilitation, welcoming settings, opportunities for peer connection and contribution, practical usefulness, and flexibility. Assessment criteria should therefore focus on whether applicants can explain the local need, the intended participant experience, the mechanisms through which the program is expected to help, and how target groups or community knowledge have informed the design.

Recommendation 9: Strengthen sector coordination and knowledge exchange

Use ANHCA and state or territory peak bodies, where appropriate, to strengthen the learning infrastructure around the SSC Grant Program. Practical options include sharing concise case studies, connecting grant recipients facing similar challenges, circulating lessons about accessible delivery and evaluation, providing light-touch grant support, and creating feedback channels between local organisations, peaks, and funders. This should not impose additional networking requirements on already stretched community organisations. The aim is to make existing knowledge easier to access and ensure that learning generated via individual grants contributes to the wider sector. Stronger coordination can also support advocacy around workforce issues, funding continuity, and community need, helping local experience inform future program and funding decisions.

5.4 EVALUATION AND EVIDENCE

Recommendation 10: Establish a small, common SSC outcome framework

Develop a concise set of common outcomes that can be used across grants without requiring every program to adopt an identical evaluation model. A core framework might capture belonging, social interaction and connections, peer or social supports, access to knowledge and resources, reciprocity or active contribution, broader community participation, and referrals or bridging connections. These domains align with both the SSC Grant Program's aims and the social outcomes underpinning this evaluation. Simple templates and guidance could improve consistency and reduce the need for each organisation to design an evaluation from scratch. The common framework should remain small and should not prevent programs from collecting additional evidence relevant to their own objectives.

Recommendation 11: Use accessible mixed-method evidence, rather than relying on a single metric

Future program evaluations should combine concise quantitative indicators with qualitative and observational evidence. Participant stories, brief open-text responses, facilitator observations, examples of referrals or new connections, and accounts of participant contributions can reveal dimensions of community impact that short metric scales miss. This is especially important for programs involving people with diverse literacy, language, or cultural backgrounds. Evaluation tools should be tested for accessibility and should minimise burden on participants, staff, and volunteers. Where standardised measures are used, their purpose and interpretive limits should be clear. A mixed-method approach is more likely to capture both whether an outcome is evident, and what it means in the context of people's lives.

Recommendation 12: To assess change, commission a longitudinal evaluation

If future funders need evidence of individual-level change over time, this should be built into the study design and resourced from the outset. A genuine longitudinal evaluation would require longer timeframes, a true pre-participation baseline, anonymous participant identifiers that allow responses to be matched across waves, consistent survey windows, planning for attrition, and direct implementation support for participating centres. It would also require sufficient evaluation funding to manage research design, recruitment, follow-up, data quality, and analysis across geographically dispersed programs. The current evaluation demonstrates why repeated cross-sectional surveys administered at varying program stages cannot retrospectively provide a reliable pre/post estimate of individual change. Future evaluation questions should therefore be matched to the study design and the resources required to answer them.

Recommendation 13: Encourage candid, learning-oriented reporting

Program evaluation and grant reporting should create space for organisations to report difficulties, unintended outcomes, and adaptations alongside successes. If providers believe that acknowledging challenges will jeopardise future funding, reporting can become overly curated and less useful for genuine learning. SSC should make clear that evidence of implementation difficulties, changing community needs, or outcomes that differ from expectations will not automatically be treated as program failure. Where useful, aggregated or anonymised processes could allow providers to share challenges without feeling that their program or organisation is being ranked. Honest learning combined with accountability should be the goal: understanding why programs succeed, where they struggle, and how the grant model can improve over time.

In conclusion, the Recommendations of this evaluation emphasise continuity, adequate resourcing, skilled relational delivery, accessible grant processes, sector learning, and evaluation methods proportionate to both the scale of the grants and the complexity of the outcomes being pursued. Taken together, these Recommendations seek to preserve the SSC Grant Program's strongest feature – locally grounded, flexible community responses – while strengthening the conditions that allow these responses to generate sustained social value.

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7. APPENDIX

7.1: SAMPLE PROGRAM MEMBER SURVEYS

SURVEY 1: PROGRAM MEMBERS | COHORT A

QR CODE

You can choose to complete this survey on paper, or online (please choose one option – not both!)
To do the survey online, scan the QRCode (top right) with your phone camera >>

About this survey: This survey is part of a Deakin University study to help understand how funding for Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres is benefiting local communities. The survey questions explore your sense of belonging and connection to your own local community. The study results will be used to inform future community programs around Australia.

The survey should take about 6–8 minutes to complete. Your answers are anonymous. Before you begin, please read the Information Sheet and sign the attached Consent Form. When you have finished the survey, please put it the envelope provided, along with your signed Consent Form, and put the envelope into the Collection Box.

QUESTION 1: Think back over the past six months and respond to the statements below, based on your feelings about being a member of your local community. ("Your local community" means the local people and groups you interact with and have a connection to.) Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each statement by writing an X one of the circles, like this: (X)

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree

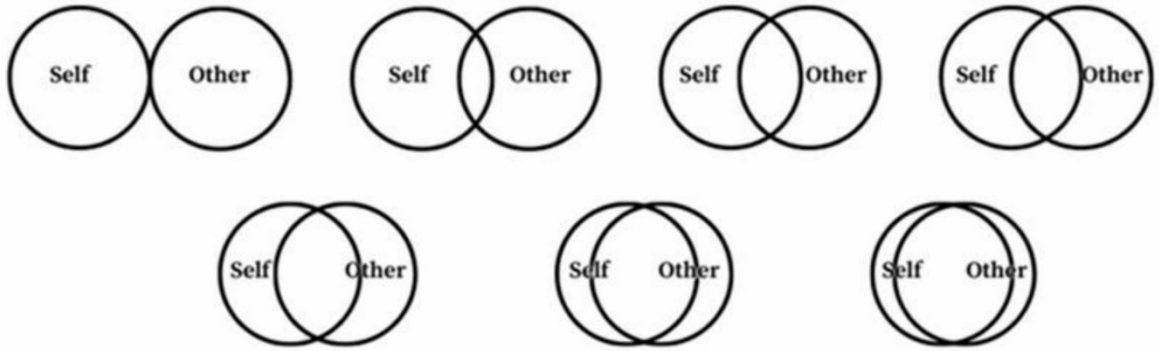
Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1. Over the past six months, as a member of my community, I felt a sense of belonging.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
2. Over the past six months, as a member of my community, I didn't really feel accepted.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
3. Over the past six months, I felt valued by other people in my community.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
4. Over the past six months, as a member of my community, I felt disregarded (ignored, or not noticed).	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
5. Over the past six months, as a member of my community, I felt like I fit in.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
6. Over the past six months, I felt like I didn't really fit in with other people in my community.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
7. Over the past six months, I felt connected with other people in my community.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
8. Over the past six months, I felt so distant from other people in my community.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

QUESTION 2: In the box below, please write down up to 10 words that come to mind when you think about your sense of belonging to your local community:

Please turn over to complete the survey

<CODE> SURVEY FORM | Page1/2

QUESTION 3: Below are some pictures that can be used to describe how connected people feel to their communities. Please choose one picture that best describes your own relationship with your local community. Mark your choice with a tick or cross.



QUESTION 4: Thinking about your involvement so far, has being part of this program helped you to connect with any of the things listed below? Please tick "Yes" or "No". If you said "Yes", please tell us a bit more about how the program has been useful to you so far.

	Yes	No	*If you said "Yes", how has the program helped you in this way?*
New information or knowledge?	◯	◯	
Useful resources?	◯	◯	
Social connections?	◯	◯	
Anything else?	◯	◯	

DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS. We are collecting some general information to help us better understand which groups are taking part in local community programs. Your answers will stay anonymous. Please place a tick or cross in the box that applies to you.

What is your gender?

Man ◯	Woman ◯	Non-binary ◯	Other identity (please specify): ◯ _____	Prefer not to say ◯

What age group do you belong to?

18–29 years ◯	30–39 years ◯	40–49 years ◯	50–59 years ◯	60–69 years ◯	70+ years ◯

Do you speak a language other than English at home?

Yes	No

How long have you lived in this local area? (The area where this project is run.)

Less than 1 year ◯	1–3 years ◯	4–6 years ◯	7–10 years ◯	Over 10 years ◯	Don't live locally ◯

Thank you for being part of this research project.

<CODE>

SURVEY 1: PROGRAM MEMBERS | SEPTEMBER COHORT

QR CODE

You can choose to complete this survey on paper, or online (please choose one option – not both!)
To do the survey online, scan the QRCode (top right) with your phone camera >>

About this survey: This survey is part of a Deakin University study to help understand how funding for Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres is benefiting local communities. The survey questions explore your sense of belonging and connection to your own local community. The study results will be used to inform future community programs around Australia.

The survey should take about 6–8 minutes to complete. Your answers are anonymous. Before you begin, please read the Information Sheet and sign the attached Consent Form. When you have finished the survey, please put it the envelope provided, along with your signed Consent Form, and put the envelope into the Collection Box.

QUESTION 1: Think back over the past six months and respond to the statements below, based on your feelings about being a member of your local community. ("Your local community" means the local people and groups you interact with and have a connection to.) Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each statement by writing an X one of the circles, like this: (X)

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1. Over the past six months, as a member of my community, I felt a sense of belonging.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
2. Over the past six months, as a member of my community, I didn't really feel accepted.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
3. Over the past six months, I felt valued by other people in my community.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
4. Over the past six months, as a member of my community, I felt disregarded (ignored, or not noticed).	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
5. Over the past six months, as a member of my community, I felt like I fit in.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
6. Over the past six months, I felt like I didn't really fit in with other people in my community.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
7. Over the past six months, I felt connected with other people in my community.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
8. Over the past six months, I felt so distant from other people in my community.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

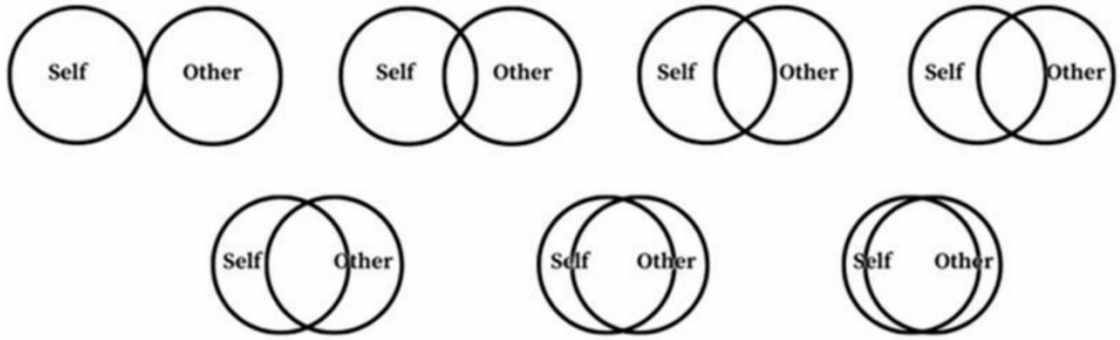
QUESTION 2: In the box below, please write down up to 10 words that come to mind when you think about your sense of belonging to your local community:

Please turn over to complete the survey

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SURVEY FORM | Page1/2

QUESTION 3: Below are some pictures that can be used to describe how connected people feel to their communities. Please choose one picture that best describes your own relationship with your local community. Mark your choice with a tick or cross.



QUESTION 4: By taking part in this program, do you hope to connect with any of the things listed below? Please tick "Yes" or "No". If you said "Yes", please tell us a bit more about what you hope to get out of the program.

	Yes	No	*If you said "Yes", please tell us a bit more about your hopes for the program...*
New information or knowledge?	◯	◯	
Useful resources?	◯	◯	
Social connections?	◯	◯	
Anything else?	◯	◯	

DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS. We are collecting some general information to help us better understand which groups are taking part in local community programs. Your answers will stay anonymous. Please place a tick or cross in the box that applies to you.

What is your gender?

Man ◯	Woman ◯	Non-binary ◯	Other identity (please specify): ◯ _____	Prefer not to say ◯

What age group do you belong to?

18–29 years ◯	30–39 years ◯	40–49 years ◯	50–59 years ◯	60–69 years ◯	70+ years ◯

Do you speak a language other than English at home?

Yes	No

How long have you lived in this local area? (The area where this project is run.)

Less than 1 year ◯	1–3 years ◯	4–6 years ◯	7–10 years ◯	Over 10 years ◯	Don't live locally ◯

Thank you for being part of this research project.

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SURVEY FORM | Page2/2

7.2: SAMPLE PROGRAM MANAGER SURVEY

SURVEY 1: PROGRAM MANAGERS [ONLINE SURVEY | IMPORTED FROM QUALTRICS]

About this survey: This survey is part of a Deakin University study to help understand how funding for Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres is benefiting local communities. This initial baseline survey collects some background details about your program, its intended outcomes, local connections and internal program monitoring. The study results will be used to inform future community programs around Australia.

The survey should take about 10-15 minutes to complete. Your answers will be kept confidential and then de-identified before analysis. At the beginning of the survey, you will be provided with the Participant Information Sheet and asked to give your consent before proceeding.

Q1: To what extent are you directly involved in the delivery/facilitation of your program?
Please mark the option that best reflects your level of involvement.

- ☐ Deliver the program myself
- ☐ Deliver program with internal staff
- ☐ Deliver program with external providers or community members
- ☐ Not directly involved in program delivery, but attend some session/s to observe
- ☐ Not directly involved in program delivery, not attending any sessions
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Q2: What specific needs or gaps does your program aim to address?

<Open-text field>

Q3: Which intended participant outcomes below apply to your program? Select all relevant items.

- ☐ Feel more accepted by others
- ☐ Feel more connected to others
- ☐ Feel more valued by others
- ☐ Feel that they fit in with others
- ☐ Strengthen ties with community
- ☐ Create shared experiences
- ☐ Enhance connections to place
- ☐ Access services/practical supports
- ☐ Increase social interaction
- ☐ Access new peer/social supports
- ☐ Build ongoing relationships
- ☐ Reduce isolation
- ☐ Gain new skills or knowledge
- ☐ Increase confidence and autonomy
- ☐ Access employment/training
- ☐ Improve health and wellbeing
- ☐ Other target outcomes (please specify)

Q4. Have other local groups/organisations been involved in the following aspects of your program?
If "Yes", please specify the organisation.

- ☐ Identifying the need for this program
- ☐ Designing the program
- ☐ Delivering the program
- ☐ Referring people to the program
- ☐ Promoting the program to community
- ☐ Providing feedback on program impacts
- ☐ Evaluating the program
- ☐ Other (please specify role)

Q5. Do you plan to use any of the following tools to monitor or evaluate your program?
Please tick any items that apply. Where relevant, please provide any key details (e.g. what you plan to measure, when you will collect this information?)

- ☐ Feedback forms
- ☐ Participant surveys
- ☐ Participant interviews
- ☐ Aptitude testing
- ☐ Direct observations/session notes
- ☐ Case studies or testimonials
- ☐ Feedback from facilitators
- ☐ Feedback from other local agencies
- ☐ Attendance and retention figures
- ☐ Participant demographics
- ☐ Referrals to program (from other agencies)
- ☐ Referrals to external services
- ☐ Participants referring others to the program
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Q6: How was the need for this program identified, and what longer-term benefits do you hope it will create for participants and/or the wider community?

<Open-text field>

DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS. We are collecting some general information to help us better understand the backgrounds of the managers of local community programs. Your answers will stay anonymous. Please select the boxes that apply to you.

What is your gender?					
Man ◯	Woman ◯	Non-binary ◯	Other identity (please specify): ◯ _____		Prefer not to say ◯
What age group do you belong to?					
18–29 years ◯	30–39 years ◯	40–49 years ◯	50–59 years ◯	60–69 years ◯	70+ years ◯
Do you speak a language other than English at home?					
Yes	No				
How long have you lived in this local area? (The area where this project is run.)					
Less than 1 year ◯	1–3 years ◯	4–6 years ◯	7–10 years ◯	Over 10 years ◯	Don't live locally ◯

Thank you for being part of this research project.

Please click on the next arrow to submit your responses.

Deakin HOME Research Centre

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