

Social Connectedness & Community Wellness



How can local governments and Indigenous communities foster social connectedness, support mental health, and create strong social environments?

This Action Guide supports British Columbia's local governments in their efforts to build healthier communities for all. It shares promising practices and examples of how local governments can create conditions that support healthy and thriving communities.

Social Connectedness & Wellness in BC

How does social connectedness affect British Columbians?

A socially connected community is a place where everyone feels like they belong. It's a place where people know their neighbours, feel motivated to get involved, build relationships, and contribute to their community. Social connection requires spaces and events for people to gather, create new friendships, and participate through volunteering and civic life. Local governments can play a role in fostering social connectedness and helping communities thrive by creating strong social environments.

Building and cultivating social connections benefits individuals and communities. People with extensive and strong support networks tend to have better physical health, a lower prevalence of mental illness, and more opportunities for sustained and secure employment.^{1,2,3} Social support also buffers the effects of adversity and stressful life circumstances.

Research shows that belonging to social groups and networks is just as important a predictor of health as diet and exercise.⁴ Social isolation, particularly among seniors, is a factor in the development of chronic illness and is a predictor of early death.^{5,6}

In June 2025, the World Health Organization released its landmark Commission on Social Connection Report, emphasizing that social wellbeing is an essential pillar of health. They outline a number of social and individual outcomes of low social connection including the increased risk of heart disease, dementia and mortality.⁷ Conversely, strong social ties buffer against these harms: people with meaningful connections report better mental and physical health, greater resilience, and higher quality of life.



Did You Know?

Statistics Canada (2025) found that youth with a strong sense of community belonging were significantly more likely than disconnected youth to:⁸

- Report good physical health (96% vs. 87%)
- Report positive mental health (87% vs. 59%)
- Have higher life satisfaction
- See positive future outcomes for themselves

"Social connection is as vital for mental health as it is for physical health."

Additionally, social connection can support stronger community safety, resilience in natural disasters, civic engagement and economic advantage.

Although 62% of Canadian adults feel a somewhat strong or very strong sense of belonging to their local community, a substantial percentage (38%) do not.⁹ Canadians with a strong sense of community belonging are over twice as likely to report that their health is good as compared with people who have a weak or very weak sense of belonging.¹⁰

Individuals and groups choose to connect in different ways, so offering different opportunities and

approaches for social connection is important in creating a welcoming and inclusive community for all. People who may face particular challenges connecting include newcomers, seniors, youth, people with disabilities, single parents, Indigenous peoples, and LGBTQ2S+ individuals.

Local governments have much to gain from supporting social connectedness because its benefits extend beyond individuals to affect the greater community. These benefits can include increased neighbourhood safety, people connecting with the services and support they need, strengthened resilience during emergency events, increased volunteering and a stronger sense of community pride.



WHO Global Spotlight: Commission on Social Connection (2025)

In June 2025, the World Health Organization released its Commission on Social Connection report, declaring that social connection is essential to maintaining our health.¹¹ Key findings: one in six people worldwide experience loneliness; loneliness accounts for approximately 871,000 deaths annually; people who are

lonely are twice as likely to develop depression; and social isolation affects up to one in three older adults and one in four adolescents globally. BC's local governments are well-positioned to lead on this emerging global priority.

Actions Local Governments Can Take

What can local governments do to increase social connectedness in communities?

Local governments are in a great position to foster the social well-being of their communities through planning and community design, policies, programs and partnerships. Local governments also develop, own, and support community infrastructure — recreation centres, parks, libraries and arts facilities — which are often hubs of community connection for residents.

> Planning

Through strategic and land use planning, local governments can strengthen community social connectedness by designing physical environments that encourage human interactions. Specifically, local governments can:

Integrate social connectedness, and culture into land use planning projects.

EXAMPLE > Kwasen Village, located in Burnaby, is a development created through a partnership between Musqueam xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Tsleel-Waututh səliwətał, and the private sector. The community is planned to be a 15 minute neighbourhood incorporating work, transit, parks and homes within one development. The master plan

includes a park district, cultural centre, and a community hearth, and incorporates native plants, hən̓qəmin̓əŋ placent names and educational signs.

Design public spaces that prioritize human interactions and social connections in existing town centres.

EXAMPLE > As part of its Downtown Action Plan, the City of Fort St. John developed a Festival Plaza, creating a year-round public open space for programmed events such as Food Truck Fridays and a farmers' market. The plaza incorporates Indigenous culture into its design and integrates information about the history of the area. The space provides opportunities for people to connect while engaging with arts and culture.

The Mental Health Connection

Research shows that increased green space is associated with lower rates for depression. Walkable neighbourhoods with parks, trails, and community gathering spaces increase physical activity and face-to-face interaction, both protective factors for depression and anxiety.

As seen in the YOUTH.HOOD research, less advantaged neighbourhoods often have lower social infrastructure, and this infrastructure supports social connection and mental health. When local governments design for connection, they are investing in community mental health.



Design the physical environments of neighbourhoods to encourage social connections through mixed-use developments, pedestrian-friendly features and community amenities.

EXAMPLE > The Comox 2026 Official Community plan incorporates complete communities with a focus on mixed used developments and multi-modal transportation options for all abilities.

EXAMPLE > Cities such as Kamloops, Vancouver and Victoria, have converted downtown streets and underused spaces into permanent and semi-permanent neighbourhood plazas, creating diverse welcoming spaces for people to relax and interact.

Assess social connectedness by gathering and using data on social connection indicators.

EXAMPLE > Researchers from SFU and the South Vancouver Neighbourhood House launched the YOUTH.HOOD project to understand how neighbourhood environments impact social connectedness for under-resourced youth. Initial research found that funding for social infrastructure (places and spaces that help people connect) fell far below the city average in South Vancouver. The research enlisted the youth themselves to identify and map the community aspects that supported or hindered their

connection. This work also highlighted the ways this inadequate infrastructure impacted youth wellbeing. The City of Vancouver passed a motion to address ongoing social infrastructure inequities in South Vancouver with a direction that staff review results from YOUTH.HOOD.

EXAMPLE > The Victoria Foundation's annual Vital Signs report measures quality of life and community health through a series of indicators, which are graded by community members. "Belonging and Engagement" indicators comprise one chapter of the report, measured through volunteerism, civic participation, participation in community events, a sense of connection, and more.

Tracking sense of belonging, frequency of social contact, and loneliness rates over time allows local governments to measure the impact of their investments and identify which populations need additional support.

Design local and regional parks to include food amenities such as picnic tables, picnic shelters and water access, allowing people to eat together in a social context.

Public parks and plazas that include seating, shade structures, accessible pathways, and food services encourage diverse community members to spend time together and build informal social connections across generations and backgrounds.

> Policies

Policies can be used to identify social connectedness as a priority in local strategic plans, which can help support programs or funding for strengthening neighbourhood connections. Local governments can also form land development policies that create spaces for social connections. Specifically, local governments can:

Include social connectedness and belonging in the objectives, goals, and strategies in official community plans, regional growth strategies, and other municipal plans.

EXAMPLE > The District of Squamish's Age-Friendly Community Plan identifies social inclusion and participation as explicit planning goals. The plan engaged Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish Nation) Elders and the local Sikh community, who identified respect, social inclusion, and cultural safety as core priorities.

Formalize social development as a core municipal function by establishing dedicated coordination roles.

EXAMPLE > In 2021, the City of Terrace created a dedicated Social Development Program Coordinator position, the first time the municipality formalized social planning as a core function. The program develops social policies, action plans, and strategies to increase social equity and community wellbeing, including programs that strengthen local connections.¹⁵

Include social connection outcomes in OCP goals alongside land use and housing priorities.

EXAMPLE > The City of Vancouver's updated 2026 Healthy City Strategy continues to highlight social connection and engagement as an essential part of building healthy communities. Within the action plan "Belonging and Connection" is one of the key goals. This goal is then supported by City initiatives and council priorities.

Provide meaningful and ongoing opportunities for citizens to be involved in the planning and policy processes of their community and include groups whose voices are often less heard in these processes.

Many of the BCHC PlanH and AFC projects incorporate meaningful participation of stakeholders in the planning and policy process of their community. This can create connection and a greater sense of belonging.

EXAMPLE > The City of Mission created an initiative to incorporate youth input into its planning process. This included establishing a Youth Voice Committee, as well as seeking input through surveys and workshops to integrate youth perspectives into Mission's Official Community Plan.

> The Mental Health Connection

When local governments embed social connection into their OCPs and social plans, they create enabling conditions for better mental health outcomes community-wide.

Community belonging is strongly linked to mental health. Policies that build belonging are, in effect, mental health policies.



> Programs

Local governments have a role in facilitating or supporting programs or services that aim to strengthen neighbourhood social connections, such as assisting neighbourhood projects, offering municipal facilities for program use, and providing citizen recognition. Specifically, local governments can:

Support residents in organizing neighbourhood block parties by providing toolkits and resources and eliminating barriers to obtaining municipal permits.

EXAMPLE > The Township of Esquimalt supports neighbourhood block parties with its Block Party Kit, which includes a toolkit, a simple application to close off residential streets, and a low-cost event trailer stocked with supplies.

Create opportunities for the inclusion of newcomers.

EXAMPLE > Much of Surrey's population (45%) reports being born outside of Canada. The City of Surrey has set up programs to create a more welcoming and connected community. One key initiative is the Surrey Local Immigration

What is Social Prescribing?

Social prescribing is a practice gaining traction across BC where healthcare providers refer patients to community-based activities — art classes, walking groups, volunteer opportunities, gardening programs — alongside or instead of medication alone.

It bridges the gap between health systems and community life, helping isolated individuals rebuild social connections through meaningful activity. Local governments can support social prescribing by providing spaces, programs, and community connectors that serve as the 'destination' for referrals from health providers.

CASE STUDY: CITY OF KELOWNA

Strong Neighbourhoods & Block Connector Program

The City of Kelowna's Strong Neighbourhoods initiative was grounded in a clear purpose: to support a culture of connection and engagement in Kelowna neighbourhoods. Through this initiative, the City provides neighbourhood grants and resources to support local connection and celebration, and encourages collaboration with neighbourhood associations. Another central component of Kelowna's Strong Neighbourhoods initiative is the Block Connector Program.

Volunteer Block Connectors build face-to-face connections with the nearest 10-20 households on their block or apartment floor. The City provides training, resources, including community of practice sessions

on topics ranging from asset-based community development to organizing block parties and emergency preparedness. Connectors organize social gatherings share news, act as a voice for their neighborhood and champion community safety.

Strong neighbourhood results by 2022¹²:

- 5,400+ residents participated in neighbourhood connection activities
- 70+ neighbourhood projects completed
- 93+ block socials held across the city

Program continues to expand through 2026 with active municipal support

Source: City of Kelowna, Strong Neighbourhoods / Block Connector Program¹⁰

Partnership, a collaborative network of government, public, and private organizations that advances projects and strategies to support newcomer integration and promote an equitable and inclusive city.

Provide resources and opportunities that support the community to connect and learn.

EXAMPLE > The Squamish Nation provides a calendar of events sharing diverse opportunities within the community and nearby regions that support culture and community connection, including drumming, art, language, and youth and men's kinship programs.

Seabird Island's Sqéwqel Development Corporation hosts an annual Youth Entrepreneurship Initiative for youth to gather, learn and dream about launching and growing a business.

Help create and sustain hubs of connection and support in your community, such as neighbourhood houses and community food centres.

EXAMPLE > The City of Vancouver provides core operating funding to its neighbourhood houses, recognizing them as a vital part of the city's social infrastructure. This support sustains a network of 12 neighbourhood houses that serve as place-based community hubs, working to strengthen social connections, reduce isolation, and improve access to programs and services that address the social determinants of health.

The Natoaganeg Community Food Centre was created in Eel Ground First Nation, New Brunswick through the support of the community, Chief, and Council. It now serves as a shared space that offers community kitchens, gardens, drop-in traditional community meals, and food skills programs.



Support community-led efforts to engage more people in volunteering, such as in places of worship, service clubs and professional associations.

EXAMPLE > Local governments can provide recognition programs, reduced facility rental rates, and logistical support for volunteer-led community events.

> Partnerships

Community organizations are playing a pivotal role in leading programs to build social connections. Local governments can partner with community organizations by supporting program funding, sharing resources and knowledge, and developing collaborative strategies. Specifically, local governments can:

Partner with health authorities, school districts, post-secondary institutions and non-profit organizations to develop collaborative strategies to improve community connections.

EXAMPLE > Through the Healthier Community Partnership (HCP), Fraser Health works in partnership with local municipalities to address the social, economic, environmental, and physical determinants of health. Municipal representatives lead and co-chair these partnerships. The Langley HCP helped establish the Aldergrove Neighbourhood House and Firehouse Café, which offer a range of programs, services, and welcoming community gathering spaces.

Partner with community foundations and not-for-profit organizations to fund neighbourhood-led projects focused on strengthening small-scale social connections.

EXAMPLE > The Municipality of Saanich offers community grant programs to support community-based associations and non-profits to undertake projects that strengthen neighbourhoods, promote participation in local activities, and build collaborative relationships.

Exchange knowledge about how to strengthen social connectedness with community partners and other local governments.

EXAMPLE > Peer-to-peer learning between BC municipalities, through UBCM, PlanH workshops, and regional district networks, supports adoption of practices for social connectedness.



Develop a community protocol or partnership agreement that bridges Indigenous and non-Indigenous neighbouring communities.

EXAMPLE > Fort St. James and Nak'azdli First Nation held a joint block party to celebrate their finalized Protocol on Cooperation and Communications agreement. The protocol recognizes Nak'azdli traditional territory and lays a framework for future project collaborations.

Collaborate with partners that bring complementary strengths in research, policy, and implementation to advance knowledge and practice in building healthy communities.

EXAMPLE > Six municipalities in the Metro Vancouver region have collaborated with Happy Cities, Hey Neighbour, and Simon Fraser University to develop policies and programs, and to evaluate their implementation, supporting inclusion, social connection, and well-being in multi-unit housing.

Resources

Key Reports & Publications

[From Loneliness to Social Connection: Charting a Path to Healthier Societies](#) – WHO Commission on Social Connection (2025)

[Community and Well-Being: Exploring Sense of Belonging Among Youth](#) – Statistics Canada (2025)

[You've Got a Friend in Me](#) – Statistics Canada 2023

[Social Isolation and Loneliness Among Older Canadians](#) – National Institute on Ageing (2023)

[Social Prescribing in Canada](#) – Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Prevention in Canada, Vol 44(6), 2024

[The Rise of Social Prescribing in Canada](#) – Canada Council for the Arts (2026)

[Social Health: The Neglected Third Pillar](#) – The Lancet Public Health (2025)



References

1. [Institute of Medicine \(US\) Committee on Health and Behavior \(2001\). Health and Behavior: The Interplay of Biological, Behavioral, and Societal Influences. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.](#)
2. [WHO Commission on Social Connection \(2025\). From Loneliness to Social Connection: Charting a Path to Healthier Societies. Geneva: World Health Organization.](#)
3. L. Xue, Social Capital and Wages Outcome of Recent Immigrants to Canada (Ottawa: Government of Canada, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2008).
4. J. Jetten, C. Haslam, S.A. Haslam, and N.R. Branscombe, "The Social Cure," Scientific American Mind 20 (2009), 26-33.
5. Steptoe, A. Shankar, P. Demakakos, and J. Wardle, Social isolation, loneliness, and all-cause mortality in older men and women (Berkeley: University of California, 2013), 5797–5801
6. J. Holt-Lunstadt, T.B. Smith, and B.L. Layton (2010). "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review." PLoS Medicine
7. Ibid., WHO Commission on Social Connection (2025).
8. [Statistics Canada \(2025\). Community and Well-Being: Exploring Sense of Belonging Among Youth. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.](#)
9. [Statistics Canada \(2023\). "Let's Talk Mental Health." Ottawa: Statistics Canada.](#)
10. [N. Ross \(2002\). "Community Belonging and Health." Health Reports 13:3. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.](#)
11. Ibid., WHO Commission on Social Connection (2025).
12. [Reeve M. \(2022\). Spring into neighbourliness this year with Strong Neighbourhoods. Kelowna, BC: Castanet.](#)

Local Government Examples

[City of Fort St. John](#) – Festival Plaza

[City of Comox](#) - 2026 OCP

[YOUTH.HOOD](#) – Cities, Health and Active Transportation Research Lab and South Vancouver Neighbourhood House

[Seabird Island Sqéwqel Development Corporation-](#) Stó:lō Youth Entrepreneurship Initiative

[Victoria Foundation](#) – Vital Signs

Eel ground First Nation - [Notaoaganeg Community Food Centre-](#)

[Healthier Community Partnership Fraser Health-](#)

[City of Kelowna](#) — Block Connector Program

[Hey Neighbour!](#) Partnerships in Metro Vancouver

[District of Squamish](#) — Age-Friendly Community Plan

[City of Terrace](#) — Social Development Program: [terrace.ca](#)

[City of Surrey](#) - Surrey Local Immigration Partnership

PlanH / BC Healthy Communities: [bchc.ca](#)