

Safe and Welcoming Community Spaces



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Introduction

This report presents findings from a research initiative supported by the Department of Health, State Government of Victoria.

The aim was to identify and understand the elements that make community spaces safe and welcoming, including individuals with experience of social isolation and/or loneliness. The research focused on the built environment, staff behaviors, inclusivity practices, and barriers to access. It also explored preferred resources and methods for upskilling community organisations.

Methodology



Insights were gathered through eight focus groups, including four general and six cohort-specific groups: older people, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) individuals, LGBTIQ+ participants, carers, and people with lived experience of loneliness and/or social isolation. The study was supplemented by a literature review and data from Neighbourhood Houses Victoria's November 2024 survey of 28,000 participants. The spread of focus groups ensured metro, regional and rural groups were included.

What makes a community space safe and welcoming?

This research was conducted with the support of the Department of Health, State Government of Victoria.

Pictured: Garden Open Day at Dandenong Community Learning Centre

The purpose of the research was to identify, document and understand;

- artefacts in the built environment that signify a 'safe and welcoming' place;
- 'safe and welcoming' behaviours in frontline staff;
- specific artefacts or behaviours to promote inclusivity of cohorts with higher risk of social isolation;
- the barriers experienced by people with lived experience to access community spaces.

The project sought the insights of Neighbourhood House participants through a series of focus groups. Four focus groups of general participants were held, while another six focused on the experiences of particular cohorts:

- Regional and rural participants
- Older participants
- Culturally and linguistically diverse participants x 2
- Lived experience of loneliness or social isolation (one group who were part of the State Government's 'Local Connections' social prescribing initiative and a second who are part of a social prescribing trial in Castlemaine)
- LGBTIQ+ participants

Focus groups were augmented by a literature review to assess the available research on the design of community spaces to encourage participation and safety. In addition, the project drew on insights from Neighbourhood Houses Victoria's survey of all participants in November 2024. With 28,000 respondents, this provided rich data on the wellbeing and belonging impacts of neighbourhood house attendance.

Potential limitations

Apart from the Lived Experience group, focus group participants were recruited through neighbourhood houses, which does limit the pool to individuals with an ongoing link to the neighbourhood house. It will not capture the views of people who only attended the neighbourhood house once, or not at all.



There is potential bias in allowing individuals to opt in to the focus groups, as it might attract individuals wishing to express a certain view.

The CALD focus group included only women. Although women make up 75% of participants in Neighbourhood Houses overall, and one community space was women-only, it would be beneficial to better understand the experiences of CALD men.

The research scope originally included an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cohort, however in consultation with two Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations, the research team received feedback that due to the well-developed cultural safety protocols for this cohort and a current feeling among the community of 'consultation burn-out', it was decided that it would be inappropriate to include this cohort.

Literature Review

Existing literature on the role and design of shared community spaces was reviewed. Shared spaces, or 'third spaces', are identified as a crucial element for addressing loneliness. Two key principals underpin value of third space areas:

- Design of Space (for accessibility, Inclusivity and Safety) and
- Practice of Space (Culture of Inclusion and Active Listening)

Key findings of the literature review:

- Barriers for access need to be understood in relation to each individual experiencing social isolation, as the needs and opportunities will differ from person to person.
- Barriers and enablers for people experiencing social isolation over a varying range of skills and traits relevant to the individual, broadly encompassing: Capability, Opportunity and Motivation.
- In order to address individual barriers, co-design methods to investigate and determine solutions ideal to understanding and mitigating barriers. Swinburne University "Supporting Access and Inclusion for Social Connection Community Provider Resource" highlights where individual intersectionality might increase or decrease barriers for successful engagement according to abilities/ vulnerabilities.

The literature review also examined three resources for engagement of vulnerable people ('Supporting Access and Inclusion for Social Connection' Community Provider Resource, 'Working with Aboriginal people and community Health and Community Services Audit,' and 'Rainbow Tick Standards: A framework for LGBTIQ cultural Safety,')

Ultimately, these resources focus to a larger extent on the information, behaviours and embeddedness of inclusive and sensitive practices, over the physical 'signals' of safety and welcomeness (although these play a critical role for people assessing an organisation for the first time).

Insights from the literature review are largely consistent with the focus group findings from this project.



Open Focus Groups

Key findings

Built Environment & First Impressions

- Improving the external appearance of the space—such as showcasing arts and crafts or garden beds—helped signal what the space offered and encouraged entry.
- A “homely” environment, featuring couches, colourful decor, and quirky elements, was frequently cited as helping participants feel at ease.
- Windows that provided visibility into the space were important for reducing anxiety; closed doors with no view inside created hesitation and uncertainty.
- Many participants reported walking past the space multiple times before feeling comfortable enough to enter.

Before First Visit

- A warm and friendly welcome was the most commonly recalled aspect of the first visit, often cited as the reason participants felt safe and encouraged to return.
- Individuals with lived experience of social isolation or anxiety often conducted online research beforehand to familiarise themselves with the space and staff, which helped reduce apprehension.

First Visit

- Few participants could recall specific features of the built environment, even when those features were present.
- For some, increasing involvement is very gradual. One participant who had been sleeping rough initially found the space intimidating and wouldn't enter, but slowly became more involved and eventually became a volunteer, illustrating that people engage according to their own confidence levels and gentle encouragement is best.
- Friendly and welcoming staff were consistently identified as the most important factor in creating a sense of safety.
- Spaces requiring sign-in procedures were viewed negatively, especially by those with prior negative experiences with government or service providers.

Return Experience

- While structured programs initially attracted participants, many expressed a desire for casual, drop-in spaces that allowed for spontaneous connection.
- Less formal offerings, such as food pantries, internet access, and book exchanges were ‘low risk’ entry points and seen as effective in encouraging repeat visits.
- Participants often contrasted the warmth and understanding of Neighbourhood House staff with more impersonal experiences in healthcare or government settings.
- A common pathway to deeper involvement was transitioning from participant to volunteer, reinforcing the importance of relational continuity and purpose.

Discussion

First Impressions and Visibility

Participants consistently emphasised the importance of external presentation and visibility into the space. Features such as garden beds, arts and crafts displays, and windows that allow a view inside helped reduce anxiety and encouraged entry. In contrast, closed doors and walls that block the view into the space created hesitation, particularly for those experiencing social anxiety.

Implication: Designing transparent and welcoming entryways can significantly lower psychological barriers and invite exploration.

Relational Warmth and Human Connection

Across all stages of engagement, warm and friendly staff interactions were the most frequently cited factor in creating a sense of safety. Participants often recalled their first welcome more vividly than any physical feature of the space.

Implication: Staff demeanour and emotional availability are central to building trust and encouraging return visits.

Emotional Safety Over Physical Design

Many participants struggled to recall specific aspects of the built environment, even when those features were present. This suggests that emotional experiences—such as feeling seen, heard, and respected—often outweigh physical design in shaping perceptions of safety.

Implication: While physical cues are helpful, emotional resonance and relational continuity are more influential in long-term engagement.

Barriers to Entry and Institutional Triggers

Sign-in procedures and formal entry protocols were viewed negatively, particularly by individuals with prior negative experiences in institutional settings. These processes were seen as impersonal and potentially retraumatising.

Implication: Minimising formal entry processes and adopting informal, welcoming approaches can improve accessibility for vulnerable groups.

Preference for Informal and Flexible Spaces

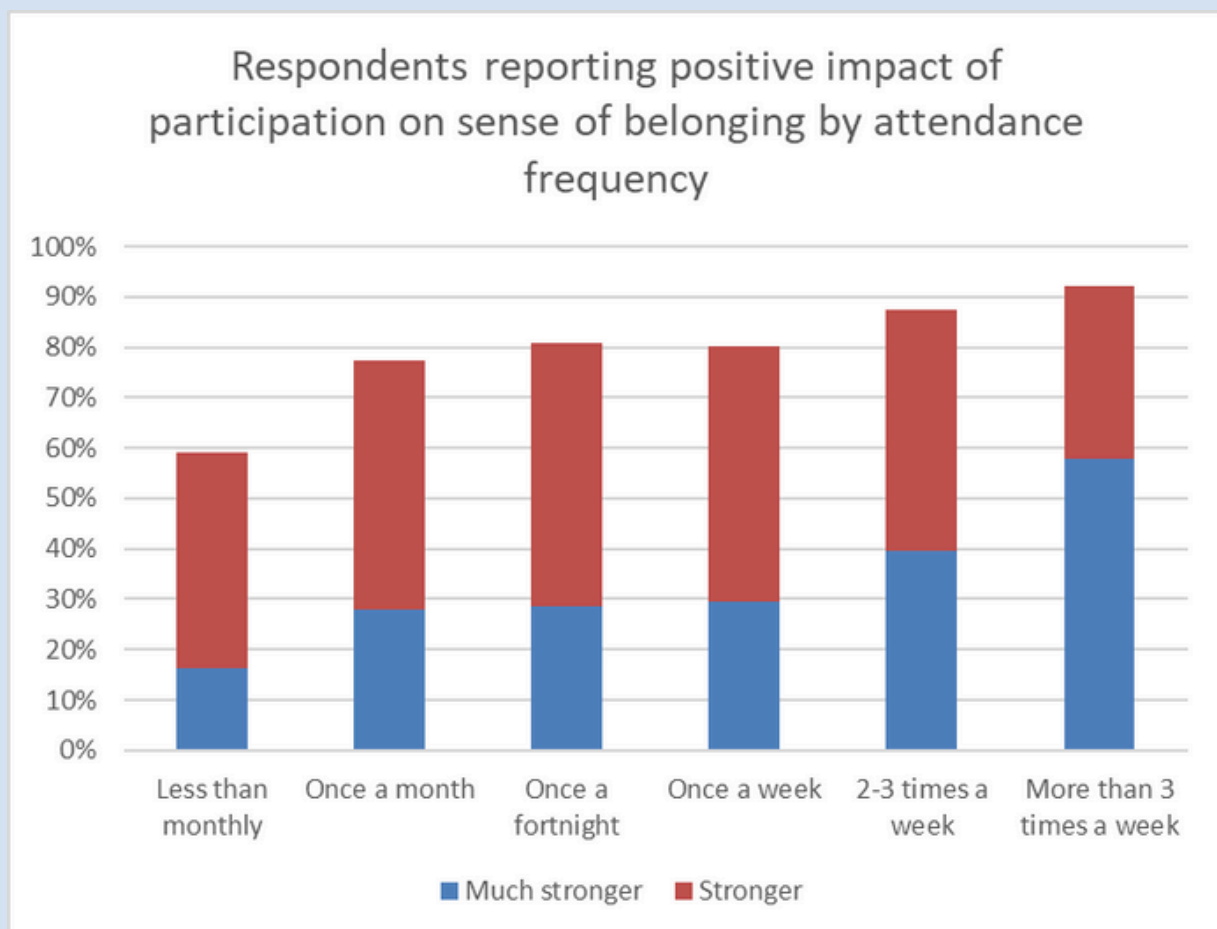
Participants expressed a strong preference for casual, drop-in spaces over structured programs. Offerings such as food pantries, internet access, and book exchanges were seen as low-pressure entry points that encouraged repeat visits and deeper engagement.

Implication: Although not always possible, flexibility space use supports spontaneous connection and accommodates diverse needs.

Volunteering as a Pathway to Belonging

A recurring theme was the transition from visitor to volunteer. This shift was often described as transformative, providing individuals with purpose, relational continuity, and a deeper sense of community.

Implication: Creating clear and supported pathways to volunteering can strengthen long-term engagement and foster mutual care. Neighbourhood House Victoria's own data shows that the more frequently a participant visits, the more likely they are to report a feeling of belonging:



Participants' sense of belonging increased the more frequently they attended the House. We also saw steady increases in physical wellbeing, emotional wellbeing, and social connections with greater frequency.

Verbatims

"I think when I first came in, there was no one behind the counter and I'm like, what's going on? Is there a bell?"

"It actually didn't feel like your traditional business. It kind of felt a little cosier. It didn't feel like a cold, sterile environment."

"We are extremely diverse and open community and that's reflected inside and out."

"Some people, if you haven't had it tough, you don't know what tough is. And my observation was the people who were here that are trying to give back, have experienced tough times."

"It was well presented, you know, a nice building and the people were very friendly, helpful in what I was chasing."

"The first thing I noticed was all the different posters and different programs or activities that were being run. And I remember thinking, I wish I'd known about that. Oh, that would have been cool."

"Three words: comfortable accepting and quirky. That door is quirky isn't it. Better than that one, that's boring."

"So I was living in the bush, in a tank...struggling.. The first time, I came here to use power to be honest with you. I got help, got a house, and it's good. Now I'm a volunteer here."

"For me this was just the right time to come in, but it was always a nice feeling when I walked past. There's signs, there's information. It all looks a bit crafty in terms of what's in the garden."

"The brochures and the posters and you can see the art up on the walls and the various sculptures that have been made. And I I really like the colourful doors and all the colours inside and the fact it's not just bland. Pretty welcoming and I really like the photo of Holly and Christy just inside the door, the child safe ones, can see they're look lovely and friendly and welcoming smiles on them."

"If you go to the Shire offices you want to talk about a building permit or rates ...if you come here it's about being involved in the community, which I'm part of."

"We don't want it to be too structured and orderly, do we? No, but I think we definitely need to increase that size to reduce maybe a slight feeling of chaos and more sense of control and calm."

"The people are compassionate and caring and understand that, you know, any given day you could come through that door with a whole backstory that you're not about to divulge but could influence the way you interact with them. Yeah. So that's what would make me keep coming back."

"What I love most about it is the people, the eccentric, wild and wonderful people. Everyone just seems to feel welcome. And they do feel like it's their place."



Pictured: Garden Open Day at Dandenong Community Learning Centre

"I've lived in this area for a while and I first noticed the mosaic and this place is really interesting and inviting because of the glass. I can look in and see them working in there and and I realise that there's a community house."

Multilingual
welcome



What to
expect
here/safe
observation
point

What's
happening
today



Fence
removed to
give visibility
into the space

Symbols of
inclusion

Street
library

Arts and
crafts

Seed and
seedling
library

Older People

Built Environment

- Hard copy materials—such as flyers and noticeboards—were frequently mentioned as helpful for building confidence before the first visit.
- Noise and perceived “chaos” within the space were off-putting for some older participants.
- Physical limitations, including poor accessibility and lack of parking, were identified as barriers to entry.
- Warmth—both physical and emotional—was considered important for comfort and return visits.

Participant Experience

Before First Visit:

- Many older adults were drawn to the space by specific activities of interest.
- Some arrived with the intention to volunteer, seeking meaningful engagement.

First Visit:

- Programs like U3A (University of the Third Age) were common entry points for ongoing involvement.
- The initial experience was shaped by the environment’s accessibility and sensory atmosphere.

Return Experience:

- Participants returned for the sense of community and friendship, often describing the space as feeling like family.
- Volunteer roles provided purpose and a reason to stay engaged over time.

Picture: Caulfield South Community Centre’s Science Week Program



Discussion

Confidence Through Information

Printed materials such as flyers and noticeboards, displayed publicly, played a significant role in building confidence before the first visit. These low-pressure resources helped older adults familiarise themselves with the space and its offerings, reducing uncertainty and encouraging initial engagement. Public information close to the entrance created a 'neutral' point to pause and assess the space.

Implication: Maintaining accessible, well-placed printed materials can support informed and confident entry for older visitors.

Sensory Environment and Accessibility

Noise and perceived "chaos" within the space were identified as deterrents for some older participants. Physical limitations, including poor accessibility and lack of parking, also presented barriers to entry.

Implication: Designing spaces with clear navigation, quiet zones, and accessible infrastructure is essential to ensure comfort and inclusion for older adults.

Warmth and Emotional Safety

Warmth, both literal and emotional, was consistently cited as important for comfort and return visits. Participants described the space as feeling "like family," suggesting that relational warmth was a key factor in sustained engagement. Spaces that were poorly heated were also a barrier to older peoples' participation.

Implication: Fostering a welcoming atmosphere through staff demeanour and community culture enhances emotional safety and belonging.

Purpose Through Volunteering

Many older adults arrived with the intention to volunteer or transitioned into volunteer roles over time. These roles provided a sense of purpose, routine, and deeper connection to the community.

Implication: Creating clear pathways to volunteering can support ongoing engagement and contribute to wellbeing among older participants. This is an area in which neighbourhood houses are particularly strong, with 12,000 regular volunteers outnumbering paid workers by more than 2:1.

Older people - Verbatims

"I mean this in a very nice way, but it's absolute chaos. Because so much happens within the Centre that it's bursting at the seams. Intentionally or not, it has become the go-to place."

"I belong to the mosaic group. I started here three years after my husband passed away, and that was the first thing I did in the three years. And through mosaics I met my best friend."

"We are extremely diverse and open community and that's reflected inside and out."

"It was well presented, you know, a nice building and the people were very friendly, helpful in what I was chasing."

Picture: Marsh Mender Volunteers at Darley Neighbourhood House and Learning Centre



"Some people, if you haven't had it tough, you don't know what tough is. And my observation was the [volunteers and paid workers] who were here that are trying to give back, have experienced tough times."

"When you retire you disappear. It's almost like being vaporised. Nobody sees. But here it gives you a purpose. Now I volunteer here and I look forward to every single Friday and it's because of the people that are here."

"I'm waiting to die basically, but I do this because there is a connection with everybody here and everybody here are really good community people. So I fit in really, really well and that's why I enjoy coming here."

"This feels like family when I come here."

LGBTIQ+ People

Built Environment

- Before visiting, participants often looked for visual symbols of inclusion, such as rainbow flags or decals. These were seen as indicators of safety, though not always a guarantee of a welcoming experience.
- Proxy symbols—like First Nations flags—were also valued as signs of broader inclusivity.
- In smaller communities, some participants preferred neutral spaces (not publicly identified as catering to LGBTIQ+ people) to avoid being publicly identified.
- The ability to see into the space from outside was important, helping individuals assess whether the environment and people inside felt friendly and safe.
- Formal entry procedures, such as being required to report to an office, were viewed negatively and likened to institutional settings, which is a negative association for many LGBTIQ+ people.

Participant Experience

Before First Visit:

- Many first heard about the space through Castlemaine Pride, which is auspiced by the Neighbourhood House.
- Invitations from friends were often the catalyst for initial engagement, with personal recommendations a trusted identifier of a safe space.
- Participants expressed a desire for discretion and safety, especially in communities where being openly LGBTIQ+ might carry social risks.

First Visit:

- Comfort was influenced by the visibility of inclusive symbols and the demeanor of people inside.

Return Experience:

- Participants expressed interest in informal, drop-in spaces that allowed for spontaneous connection.
- While initial involvement was often through Pride-related events, many broadened their engagement over time.
- The culture of the organisation—its values, relationships, and inclusivity—was consistently highlighted as more important than physical features in fostering a sense of safety and belonging.



Discussion

Symbolic Inclusion and Visual Cues

Before visiting, many participants looked for visual indicators of safety, such as rainbow flags, decals, or First Nations symbols. These cues were seen as important signals of inclusivity, though not always a guarantee of a welcoming experience.

Implication: Displaying inclusive symbols can help signal safety and openness, but must be supported by genuine cultural practices and relational warmth.

Privacy and Discretion in Small Communities

In smaller or close-knit communities, some participants preferred neutral environments to avoid being publicly identified. The ability to observe the space from outside—through windows or open layouts—was valued as a way to assess safety before entering.

Implication: Community spaces should balance visibility with discretion, offering entry options that respect privacy while still feeling open and approachable.

Negative Associations with Formal Entry Procedures

Formal protocols, such as reporting to an office or signing in, were often likened to institutional settings and viewed negatively. These procedures could trigger discomfort or distrust, particularly for those with prior negative experiences.

Implication: Adopting informal, friendly entry processes can reduce anxiety and foster a sense of safety and belonging.

Culture Over Decor

While physical symbols were appreciated, participants emphasised that the culture of the organisation—its values, relationships, and inclusive practices—was more important in shaping their sense of safety.

Implication: Inclusive culture must be embedded in staff behaviour, peer relationships, and everyday interactions—not just in visual design.

Flexible and Informal Engagement

Participants expressed a preference for informal, drop-in spaces that allowed for spontaneous connection. While initial involvement often came through Pride-related events, many broadened their engagement over time, drawn by the welcoming atmosphere and relational continuity.

Implication: Offering flexible programming and low-pressure entry points supports ongoing participation and deeper community ties.

LGBTIQ+ - Verbatims

"I know we're talking about the physical space, but it's really also about the culture of the organisations...it's the culture of the organisation that volunteers and participants here are always talk about to their friends."

"Though we've had lots of events here, it's definitely come in and set the rainbows up and then pack the rainbows down. "

[Participant in the Pride group] "I've done gardening and started the carpentry, done the community lunches. Because I feel safe now in that environment, I'm happy."

"Some people want open windows and rainbow flags, so you can walk in and you're comfortable. On the other hand, some people might be uncomfortable that an aunt or uncle or neighbour or someone they work with there and going in so they're always having a a back door entrance which is not public can be a good idea for some of some of the sort of functions that are happening here."

"Paint the community mural on the front of the building, that covers all the community and access and maybe tells a story about what is inside. Not just, you know, not just a flag or something like that. But, you know, a a flag, something rainbow in amongst that would tell us that, oK, that's good. Oh, that's progressive flag. Yep. There's the Aboriginal flag. There's the Trans Flag. You would start to go and connect with all the things that are really important to you and walk in."

"If the windows inside were clear, so you when you look in, you know what it's gonna be like, that sort of thing. Might be more welcoming, especially people who are perhaps a bit anxious."

Carers

Built Environment

- On their first visit, some carers chose to remain in their cars initially, reading information posted in the windows to assess the space and build confidence.
- The noticeboard was noted for its abundance of relevant information, offering a centralised resource for carers.
- Although the space was described as “dark and dingy” prior to renovations, this did not deter participants from returning.

Participant Experience

Before First Visit:

- Activities offered a non-stigmatising way to meet social connection needs.
- Many carers expressed a strong desire for personal time—an opportunity to step outside their caregiving identity.
- External encouragement from family members or case workers was often necessary to prompt initial engagement.

First Visit:

- A warm and friendly welcome was consistently cited as essential to feeling safe and accepted.
- Some carers brought family members for emotional support and accountability.
- Feeling recognised as individuals—not solely as carers—was a key aspect of perceived safety.
- A few participants chose to use only their first names to maintain a sense of privacy.

Return Experience:

- Ongoing relationships formed within the space were a major factor in continued attendance.

Several participants transitioned into volunteer roles, motivated by a desire to give back to the community.

Discussion

Carers consistently emphasised the value of being seen as individuals beyond their caregiving responsibilities. Feeling welcomed and acknowledged upon entry was essential to building trust and comfort.

Implication: Staff should be trained to engage with carers in ways that affirm their personal identity and offer emotional support, particularly during initial visits. Carer-specific training is important to understand the (sometimes complex or contradictory) needs of this cohort.

Privacy and Discretion

Some carers chose to use only their first names or brought family members for emotional support, indicating a need for discretion and psychological safety.

Implication: Community spaces should offer privacy options and flexible entry experiences that respect individual comfort levels.

Barriers to Initial Engagement

Initial participation was often prompted by external encouragement—from family members or case workers—suggesting that carers may require additional support to overcome hesitation.

Implication: Outreach strategies should include referral pathways and gentle encouragement to help carers take the first step toward engagement.

Value of Non-Stigmatising Activities

Activities that did not explicitly label participants as carers were appreciated for providing a sense of normalcy and personal time.

Implication: Programming should include inclusive, low-pressure activities that allow carers to participate without reinforcing their caregiving identity.

Relational Continuity and Volunteering

Ongoing relationships formed within the space were a major factor in continued attendance. Many carers transitioned into volunteer roles, motivated by a desire to give back and deepen their connection to the community.

Implication: Creating supported pathways to volunteering can foster long-term engagement and provide carers with a renewed sense of purpose.

Carers - Verbatims

"I'd been looking after my husband and my husband's case manager said to me I had to get out and do something, which I really appreciated her pushing me and I noticed that they had mosaics here. So I decided to join and I enjoy it, really enjoy it."

"It's not starched like a new building would be. It doesn't have that sterile feel. It's a more welcoming sort of situation, and as soon as you walk through the door, it's, good morning, how are you going? Very welcoming. Nice."

"I love having time where I'm not defined by being a carer, that my identity is not the carer."

"I was very nervous coming in because this was the first thing I actually started to do [outside of home since becoming a carer]. But when I walked in, I was greeted really nice by the ones in the front."

"Actually, we sat in the car before we came in reading all [the information] on the window."

"I knew that when I walked in the door, I'd have someone to talk to, I'd have something to do. It was just a relief to find somewhere where I could go and feel more like myself, like I used to."

"I have something important to say: that we come here and we can talk to other people as carers and they understand because they're doing the same thing."



Pictured: Creswick Neighbourhood Centre; Community Lunch

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Participants

Note: all participants were female across two separate locations

Built Environment

- Flags and artwork displayed outside the building helped distinguish the space from surrounding houses and signalled a welcoming environment.
- At one site, participants valued the women-only setting, which fostered a sense of safety and allowed them to express themselves freely.
- The garden was the most frequently mentioned physical feature, appreciated for its beauty and calming presence.

Participant Experience

Before First Visit:

- Many participants expressed a desire to give back to the community, which motivated their initial engagement.
- Curiosity and a desire to learn—particularly to improve English language skills—were common reasons for visiting.

First Visit:

- Trust began forming from the first interaction, especially when staff were kind and welcoming.
- English classes were a popular entry point, and participants appreciated staff who were patient and responsive to their learning pace.

Return Experience:

- Affordability of programs was a key factor in continued attendance.
- The availability of childcare enabled ongoing participation, especially for mothers.

Discussion

The experiences of CALD women highlight the importance of culturally sensitive environments, relational trust, and practical supports such as childcare and language learning. Their insights reflect how safety and belonging are shaped by both physical space and interpersonal dynamics.

Cultural Safety Through Environment

Participants valued visual cues such as flags and artwork that distinguished the community space from surrounding buildings and signalled a welcoming atmosphere. At one site, the women-only setting was particularly appreciated, fostering a sense of safety and allowing for freer self-expression.

Implication: Community spaces serving CALD women should consider gender-specific environments and culturally relevant visual markers to promote comfort and inclusion.

Trust Built Through First Contact

Trust began forming from the very first interaction, especially when staff were kind, patient, and welcoming. English classes were a common entry point, and participants appreciated staff who adapted to their learning pace.

Implication: Staff training should emphasise patience, cultural sensitivity, and responsiveness to diverse learning needs to foster trust and engagement.

Motivations for Engagement

Initial visits were often motivated by a desire to give back to the community or improve English language skills. Curiosity and informal exploration also played a role, with some participants drawn in by signage or visible activity.

Implication: Outreach strategies should highlight opportunities for contribution and learning, and ensure that external signage and displays are inviting and informative.

Pictured: Wellsprings for Women Codesign Gardening Group



Practical Supports Enable Participation

Affordability of programs and the availability of childcare were key enablers of ongoing attendance, particularly for mothers. These supports helped reduce barriers and made regular engagement possible.

Implication: Community spaces should offer low-cost programs and accessible childcare to support sustained participation among CALD women.

CALD participants – verbatim

“We have a lot of dancing here, but if the men are here, we can’t. When you say something to us, it’s a secret. Yeah, it’s safe. Trust. And you can’t get that if men were here.”

“When we love somewhere (Wellsprings for Women), we feel ourselves responsible for that.”



“I was roaming here and there and I saw it says community centre and I didn't even know the meaning. I was just wanting to have, what you say, a sticky beak. And [the manager] made me feel comfortable. I said, what's it all about? She says community things and you know, you can do anything here. She was doing some preserving, I said, oh, can I help you? And it all sort of got started then.”

People with Lived Experience of Loneliness and/or Social Isolation

Built Environment

- Participants reported feeling anxious when approaching the space and often did not notice external features.
- On their first visit, some were deterred by the busy, loud environment and bright colours or lighting.
- Quieter settings, such as those found in mental health and wellbeing locals, spaces were preferred, especially those with softer colours, calm atmospheres, and private meeting rooms.

Participant Experience

Before First Visit:

- A link worker helped participants identify community activities aligned with their interests, easing the transition into the space.
- Videos, photos on the web or social media allowed participants to familiarise themselves with the space, people and likely experience in advance, lessening anxiety felt about the first visit.

First Visit:

- Negative experiences occurred when staff were busy, preoccupied or appeared stressed, leading to feelings of being unwelcome.

Return Experience:

- Anxiety decreased over time as participants became more familiar with the space and its people.

Discussion

The experiences of individuals with lived experience of loneliness and social isolation reveal critical design and engagement considerations for community spaces. These insights underscore the importance of emotional safety, sensory sensitivity, and relational continuity.

Anxiety and Sensory Overload as Barriers to Entry

Participants often approached community spaces with significant apprehension

Many did not notice external features due to heightened anxiety, and some were deterred by environments that were busy, loud, or brightly coloured. This suggests that overstimulating settings can act as a barrier, particularly for those with mental health challenges.

Implication: Spaces catering to this cohort should be designed with calm, quiet zones, soft lighting, and muted colours to reduce sensory overload and promote comfort.

Importance of Calm and Private Environments

Mental health and wellbeing (MH&W) spaces were preferred due to their tranquil atmospheres and availability of private meeting rooms. These features helped participants feel safe and respected, especially during initial visits.

Implication: Community spaces should incorporate private areas and quiet zones to support emotional regulation and confidential conversations.

Role of Link Workers and Peer Support

Before their first visit, many participants were supported by link workers who helped identify suitable activities and eased the transition into the space. Peer support also played a vital role in building trust and reducing isolation.

Implication: Embedding peer-led engagement and referral pathways can significantly improve access and retention for socially isolated individuals.

Staff Presence and Emotional Availability

Negative experiences were reported when staff appeared distracted or stressed, leading participants to feel unwelcome. Conversely, emotionally present and compassionate staff were seen as central to creating a sense of safety and belonging.

Implication: Staff training should emphasise emotional availability, active listening, and trauma-informed approaches to engagement.

Gradual Reduction of Anxiety Through Familiarity

Anxiety decreased over time as participants became more familiar with the space and its people. This highlights the importance of relational continuity and repeated exposure in fostering comfort and connection.

Implication: Community spaces should support ongoing participation through consistent staffing, welcoming routines, and opportunities for deeper involvement (e.g., volunteering).

Lived experience - verbatims

Note: two lived experience focus groups were made up of participants in NEAMI's Local Connections program, who all had experience of social isolation and/or loneliness and reported diagnoses of anxiety/and or depression. A third focus group were participants in the Castlemaine 'Be Connected' social prescribing program.

“Up here, you're a person. You know you're an actual person. You have a face. You have a name. And they care about you. And I like that.”

“Whenever I go anywhere, I always panic about parking. You know, if I can get a park out the front.”

“First I joined the craft group, then also physically I haven't been very well. So I joined a walking group. Which is in South Morang every Friday. And when I go to these groups, I'm usually accompanied by a peer support person, which is really comforting.”

“I've had negative experiences over the years with counsellors or psychologists, not feeling very connected, but as far as neighbourhood houses go, and the mental health and well being centre, I feel very safe there. It's very safe. And non-judgmental.”

“To see these people you know, it's like a home for you. You feel very comfortable and relaxing the way they're talking.”



Recommendations

General recommendations for all community spaces

- **Prioritise a warm welcome:** Configure entry areas to enable immediate human connection. Remove physical or procedural barriers that may inhibit engagement.
- **‘Bring the inside out’:** If visibility into the space is limited, use external symbols—such as rainbow flags, multilingual signage, and community artwork—to signal inclusivity and activity.
- **Maintain dynamic noticeboards:** A regularly updated noticeboard near the entrance provides a low-pressure way for visitors to acclimatise and learn about offerings.
- **Use staff imagery:** Display photos of smiling staff members to create a sense of approachability and familiarity, both in person and online.



- **Encourage volunteer pathways:** Provide clear and supported opportunities for participants to transition into volunteer roles, fostering purpose, confidence and continuity.
- **Leverage public storytelling:** Use websites, social media, and community channels to share stories of safety, inclusion, and belonging.
- **Offer virtual tours:** Online walkthroughs can reduce anxiety for prospective visitors, especially those experiencing social isolation or mental health challenges.
- **Formalise the ‘welcomer’ role:** Develop a position description for volunteers or staff tasked with greeting newcomers, ensuring consistent and inclusive engagement.



Pictured: Creative Exhibition at Highett Neighbourhood Community House & Hampton Community Centre

Case studies

Case study 1: Sam's Journey

Background: Sam experienced homelessness and lived in challenging conditions, including residing in a tank in the bush. His initial visits to the Neighbourhood House were driven by a need for basic amenities like power and internet access.

Initial Challenges: Sam found the environment intimidating at first. The closed doors and lack of immediate reception made him question whether he was in the right place. This initial barrier made it difficult for him to feel comfortable and welcome.



Features of the Neighbourhood House:

1. **Non-Intrusive Access to Amenities:**

- The ability to use power and Wi-Fi without having to interact immediately provided Sam with a sense of security and autonomy. This feature was crucial in making the space inviting and non-threatening.

2. **Friendly and Welcoming Staff:**

- Chrissy and Holly played a significant role in making Sam feel safe. Their friendly and non-intrusive approach helped Sam feel more at ease. They allowed him to use the facilities without pressure, which gradually built his trust.

3. **Non-Pressured Environment:**

- The Neighbourhood House created an environment where people could come and go without feeling obligated to engage immediately. This approach was particularly effective for those who were guarded or hesitant to interact.

4. **Community and Belonging:**

- The space provided a sense of community and belonging. Over time, Sam observed that people who initially kept to themselves would eventually start to communicate and integrate into the community.

5. **Respect for Privacy:**

- The Neighbourhood House respected users' privacy, allowing them to use facilities without having to provide personal information immediately. This respect for privacy was crucial in making people feel safe and respected.

6. **Flexible Interaction:**

- The ability to interact at one's own pace was a significant factor. Sam noted that people could start by keeping to themselves and gradually begin to communicate as they felt more comfortable.

Impact on Sam's Life: Accessing the Neighbourhood House made a significant difference in Sam's life. It provided him with a safe space to charge his phone, use the internet, and eventually, become a volunteer. This involvement gave him a sense of purpose and community. The welcoming environment helped Sam feel connected and supported, which was crucial for his well-being.

Conclusion: Sam's journey with the Neighbourhood House highlights the transformative power of community support. By providing a safe, non-judgmental, and accessible space, the Neighbourhood House helped Sam transition from a state of homelessness to becoming an active and valued member of the community. His story is a testament to the importance of creating environments where people can feel safe, connected, and supported.

Case studies

Case study 2: Maria's Journey

Background: Maria has lived in Lalor for 30 years, with roots in Epping and a brief stint in South Morang. She works in aged care as a laundry assistant and has been with her current employer for over a decade. Maria has always been passionate about volunteering, a value instilled in her by her father, who was an active volunteer throughout his life.

Challenges: Maria experienced a downward spiral last year, which led her to seek support from NEAMI, where she benefited greatly from peer support. Despite her long-standing commitment to volunteering, Maria sometimes struggled with shyness and lacked confidence in social situations.



Discovery of the Neighbourhood House: Maria's involvement with the Neighbourhood House began in August of last year. Initially, she was unaware of the various activities and support available. However, as she started attending regularly, she discovered the community lunch, relief boxes, and other programs that the Neighbourhood House offered.

Impact on Maria's Life:

- **Increased Confidence and Social Engagement:**
 - Maria's confidence grew significantly through her interactions at the Neighbourhood House. The supportive environment and the opportunity to express herself freely helped her overcome her shyness.
 - She took on leadership roles, such as guiding new volunteers and planning gardening activities, which further boosted her self-esteem.

1. Sense of Belonging and Appreciation:

- The warm and welcoming atmosphere at the Neighbourhood House made Maria feel valued and appreciated. The hugs, kisses, and positive feedback from fellow volunteers and community members reinforced her sense of belonging.
- Maria found joy in being part of a community that recognised her efforts, something she felt was lacking in her paid work.

2. Emotional Well-being:

- Volunteering at the Neighbourhood House provided Maria with a sense of purpose and happiness. She referred to it as her "happy place," where she could escape the stresses of work and feel uplifted.
- The community's support helped Maria navigate through difficult times, including her injury at work and the temporary closure over the Christmas break.

3. New Opportunities and Skills:

- Maria embraced new activities, such as cooking classes, sewing, and mosaic workshops, which enriched her life and provided additional avenues for social interaction.
- She also became more tech-savvy, staying informed about community events through emails and social media updates.

Conclusion: Maria's involvement with the Neighbourhood House has made a profound difference in her life. It has provided her with a safe and welcoming space where she feels appreciated and connected. The supportive community has helped Maria build confidence, find joy in volunteering, and improve her overall well-being. Her story is a testament to the positive impact that community engagement and support can have on an individual's life.



Case studies

Case study 3: Nina's Journey

Background: Nina moved to the community around four years ago and became involved with the local Neighbourhood House through the PRIDE committee. Her previous experiences with community houses were limited, but her involvement with the PRIDE committee has significantly shaped her view of the Neighbourhood House as a vital community hub.

Initial Impressions: Nina's first encounter with the Neighbourhood House was through an invitation to join a PRIDE committee meeting. Initially unsure about the building and its purpose, she found the presence of Aboriginal First Nations elements welcoming but noted a lack of visible LGBTQI+ symbols.



Community Engagement: Nina's involvement with the Neighbourhood House deepened as she participated in various activities, including gardening, woodwork, and community lunches. She also volunteered at events like the Pride Picnic and the Spring Ball. These experiences helped her build strong connections within the community and fostered a sense of belonging.

Observations and Suggestions: Nina highlighted several areas for improvement to make the Neighbourhood House more inviting and inclusive:

- **Visibility of LGBTQI+ Symbols:** Increasing the presence of rainbow flags and other LGBTQI+ symbols to make the space more visibly welcoming.
- **Community Mural:** Creating a mural that reflects the diversity of the community, including various flags and local flora and fauna, to tell the story of what the Neighbourhood House represents.
- **Themed Rooms:** Designing rooms with specific themes (e.g., a green room for permaculture) to make the space more engaging and easier to navigate.
- **Storage Solutions:** Addressing practical issues like storage to keep the space tidy and safe.
- **Social Enterprise Cafe:** Establishing a cafe as a social enterprise to provide training and job opportunities for young people, fostering community engagement and support.

Impact of the Neighbourhood House: Nina emphasised the significant positive impact the Neighbourhood House has had on her and others' mental health and wellbeing. The community connections and programs offered have been life-changing for many, providing a sense of security, support, and belonging.

Conclusion: Nina's perspective underscores the importance of the Neighbourhood House as a safe and inclusive space for the LGBTQI+ community. Her suggestions for improvement highlight the potential for the Neighbourhood House to become an even more welcoming and vibrant community hub. By addressing these areas, the Neighbourhood House can continue to support and uplift its diverse community members.

Research Sites



Creswick Neighbourhood Centre



Alphington Community Centre



Whittlesea Mental Health & Wellbeing Local



Red Cliffs Community Resource Centre



Springvale Neighbourhood House



Lalor Neighbourhood House



Castlemaine Neighbourhood House



Wingate Avenue Community Centre

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Contact



Pictured: Garden Open Day at Dandenong Community Learning Centre

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