How can local governments foster social connectedness and help communities thrive by creating 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.

Actions can include planning and consultation, implementing bylaw and policy changes, and supporting programs and partnerships with community stakeholders. The specific actions recommended below are compiled from both evidence-based best practice and promising innovations that are showing results in Canadian communities.
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 and feel motivated to get involved, build relationships, and contribute to the creation of strong social networks. A socially connected community requires spaces and events for people to gather, create new friendships, and contribute to the community through volunteering. Socially connected communities support strong citizen engagement and increase the health and well-being of residents. 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 through lower rates of unhealthy behaviours (such as smoking, drinking, and an inactive lifestyle), a lower prevalence of mental illness, and more opportunities for sustained and secure employment. Social support is also important for buffering the effects of an adverse event or stressful life circumstance. Research shows that belonging to social groups and networks is just as important a predictor of health as diet and exercise. In fact, social isolation, particularly among seniors, is a factor in the development of chronic illness and is as strong a factor in early death as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Although 68% of British Columbians feel a strong or very strong sense of belonging to their local community, a significant percentage (32%) do not. Canadians with a strong or very 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 community belonging.

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 that may encounter particular challenges connecting to their community include new immigrants, seniors, youth, people with disabilities, single parents, and Aboriginal peoples. Furthermore, people may face different barriers when connecting based on demographic factors, such as age, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status.

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.
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 the use of planning and community design, policies, programs and partnerships. Local governments also develop, own, and support community infrastructure, such as community and 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 through designing physical environments that encourage human interactions. Specifically, local governments can:

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

**Example** Communities across B.C. have created Spirit Squares as gathering places for residents and spaces for community events. Fort St. James’s Spirit Square is home to a collection of public artwork depicting the rich historical and cultural fabric of the area. Benches, picnic tables and beautiful landscaping encourage people to spend time with other citizens in the square.

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

**Example** The District of Squamish’s Downtown Neighbourhood Plan includes the design requirement that “mid- and large-scale new buildings in downtown shall provide public plazas, to create opportunities for social interaction and to contribute to the livability and vibrancy of the downtown.”

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

**Example** The 2010 Richmond Community Wellness Strategy suggests planning principles that draw connections between the physical environment (such as the size of blocks, presence of sidewalks, number of parks and trails, availability of bike lanes, and nearness of shops and recreational and cultural facilities) and the social impact of whether residents know their neighbours and feel part of the community.

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.

Assess social connectedness by gathering and using data on social connection indicators to measure progress and better understand groups that are most affected by social isolation.

**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.

Did You Know?

In 2013, the McCreary Centre Society’s province-wide Adolescent Health Survey found that students who felt connected to their community were more likely than those who felt disconnected to:

- see only positive future outcomes for themselves (92% vs. 80%)
- think they were really good at something (83% vs. 66%)
- report feeling happy all or most of the time in the past month (80% vs. 50%)

Support community agencies in securing space in new developments, which will help incorporate community hubs in multi-unit residential buildings.

**Example** The City of Richmond’s 2013–2022 Social Development Strategy identifies the action item of developing a guideline on the City’s role and procedures for assisting community agencies to secure space, particularly in planned new developments.
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 City of Burnaby’s Social Sustainability Strategy includes a strategic priority of “getting involved.” It contains a section on neighbourhoods that considers the role of social connections, recommending the “creation of smaller neighbourhood-based centres as service and meeting hubs with games area” and “attracting people to neighbourhood and large-scale gathering places with art, music, and spoken word.”

Support social connectedness through zoning bylaws and density bonusing by allowing variances for residential developers to receive additional density or height in exchange for creating common, shared-use spaces.

**Example** In the Marpole neighbourhood in Vancouver, city planners use density bonusing as a zoning tool, which allows developers to build more floor space than normally allowed in exchange for community amenities, such as community centres, libraries and parks.

Case Study: Kelowna

In 2014, the City of Kelowna initiated the Strong Neighbourhood Project with the aim “to increase citizen level of attachment to the community by being a catalyst in inspiring neighbourhoods that foster a culture of connection and engagement.”

The first year of the program involves piloting the following projects:

- **Good Neighbourhood Toolkit**: to provide tips on how to meet and develop relationships between neighbours.
- **Strong Neighbourhood Toolkit**: to guide neighbourhoods on small-scale projects and events to increase the vibrancy and health of their communities.
- **Neighbourhood Events Program**: to support resident-initiated neighbourhood events.
- **Strong Neighbourhood Webpage**: to offer a resource hub with information on toolkits, neighbourhood events, and City services.
- **Neighbourhood Building Grants Program**: to support small-scale, community-driven projects that foster connections at a neighbourhood level.
Actions Local Governments Can Take

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 other 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 block party toolkit, a simple application to close off residential streets, and a low-cost event trailer stocked with supplies.

Provide funding for neighbourhood-based projects for community building and development.

*Example* The Township of Langley’s Neighbourhood Initiative Program provides funding to support the community in developing recreational opportunities for public parks. Langley will share costs on neighbourhood-led capital construction projects, such as playgrounds.

Create opportunities for the inclusion of newcomers.

*Example* Much of Surrey’s population (41%) reports being born outside of Canada, and the city receives more refugees than anywhere else in B.C. The City of Surrey has set up various programs to create a more welcoming and connected community, including Tours for Newcomers, an English Conversation Program, and Youth Conversation Circles.

Provide spaces and opportunities for intergenerational social connections.

*Example* The Municipality of Saanich brings together groups of teens and older adults through their intergenerational recreation and social programs that offer a social setting for youth and seniors to play games and connect over conversations.

Provide recognition to residents who actively volunteer.

*Example* The City of Fernie presents the George S. Majic Spiritus Award annually to a person or persons who have demonstrated a constant commitment to the community.

Bring neighbours together to learn skills taught by representatives from government departments. These skills can include emergency preparedness, fire safety, community safety, and energy saving projects.

*Example* During the 2015 spring break, Pauquachin First Nation on Vancouver Island brought neighbours together through a series of workshops on first aid, recycling, food safety, drug awareness and more. These workshops were accompanied by community lunches.

Dedicate a day to celebrating neighbourliness and promote community-organized gatherings.

*Example* The City of Abbotsford designated September 20 as “Neighbours Day” to inspire greater neighbourhood connections. The City created a video of residents sharing what it means to be a neighbour.

Support low-cost recreation opportunities for bridging connections between community members.

*Example* The City of Quesnel partnered with Quesnel Youth Soccer to open up their indoor soccer centre for a free walking program for seniors 60 and over. The program has gained popularity and has up to 130 participants per day.

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* In August 2012, the City of Vancouver partnered with the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority and other stakeholders to develop its Healthy City Strategy. One of the seven priority areas identified was “cultivating connections.” Under this priority area, one of the targets for 2025 is “all Vancouverites report that they have at least four people in their network that they can rely on.”
Local Government Action Guide: Social Connectedness

Checklist

Partner with school districts to access underutilized space for community-based programs. Schools, which can be underutilized during evenings and weekends, have the potential to become Neighbourhood Learning Centres that help build community connections.

**Example** Harwin Elementary school in Prince George has created a gathering room for urban Aboriginal parents, where they can access resources and services, in an effort to increase the parents’ comfort about being involved in school activities.

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

**Example** The Municipality of Saanich offers the Small Sparks and Neighbourhood Matched Project Grants to support community-based associations and nonprofits to undertake projects or events that strengthen neighbourhoods, promote participation in local activities and build collaborative relationships.

Develop a partnership with the local Aboriginal Friendship Centre in your community which serves as an umbrella organization to support First Nations, Inuit and Métis people to access programs and supports, connecting them to culturally safe community initiatives.

Collaborate with building managers or strata councils to engage residents in social events or community volunteering.

Develop community protocol or partnership agreements that bridge Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal 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 that recognizes Nak’azdli traditional territory, articulates the respect the two communities hold for each other, and lays a framework for future project collaborations.

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

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

The following checklist can help assess the ways that social connectedness is supported in the community and provide insight into next steps. How many boxes can be checked off for your local government?

**Does your organization:**

- [ ] Identify social connectedness as a priority in official plans or strategies?
- [ ] Form land development policies that promote the creation of social gathering spaces?
- [ ] Create design guidelines that prioritize human interactions?
- [ ] Partner with community organizations to support neighbourhood-led projects?
- [ ] Collaborate with community partners to engage more residents in volunteering?
- [ ] Create spaces and opportunities in municipal facilities for developing social connections?
- [ ] Track community members’ sense of social connectedness?
- [ ] Raise community awareness about the importance of neighbourliness and share resources on social connectedness?
- [ ] Consider the demographics of the community (e.g. aboriginal populations, ethnic diversity) in planning culturally safe and relevant engagement opportunities.
Resources


Building Neighbourhood Social Resilience City of Vancouver, 2014


The Impact of Social Isolation on Seniors’ Quality of Life and Well-being Government of Canada, National Seniors Council, 2015


Everybody’s Welcome: A Social Inclusion Approach to Program Planning and Development for Recreation and Parks Services SPARC BC and BC Recreation and Parks Association, 2006


Connections and Engagement Vancouver Foundation, 2012

Healthy Living – Public Policy Makes a Difference: Social Cohesion Vancouver Coastal Health, 2013

Social Connectedness and Health Wilder Foundation, 2012

References


5. Ibid.


8. Statistics Canada, “Table 105-0501. Health indicator profile, annual estimates, by age group and sex, Canada, provinces, territories, health regions (2012 boundaries) and peer groups,” (2014)


11. Ibid., Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Health and Behavior.


13. Ibid., M. Marmot and R. Wilkinson.


Want support or to learn more about improving health and well-being in your community?

Health authorities can support local governments by providing advice and expertise on health, acting as a resource for local government staff and elected officials to develop healthy public policy, providing community health profiles, and facilitating opportunities and partnerships to work together on joint healthy living actions. You might already have relationships with your health authority. If not, the contacts below are a good place to start:

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More Information

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