Building social cohesion in our communities

A SUMMARY OF THE ONLINE RESOURCE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT • 2015
About this resource

**Building social cohesion in our communities** is an interactive online resource to support local governments to build strong, socially cohesive communities.

It aims to help local governments to:

- Understand their communities and measure social cohesion
- Engage their communities and build partnerships between key stakeholders
- Prevent and respond to incidents of racism or conflict between groups
- Strategically plan for the needs of their communities now and into the future
- Monitor, evaluate and share outcomes.

The online resource is structured around **five elements for social cohesion**. It features case studies from local governments around Australia, tips for implementing good practice at the local level and links to further resources.

The online resource is available at [www.acelg.org.au/socialcohesion](http://www.acelg.org.au/socialcohesion)

Why is social cohesion important for local government?

Social cohesion refers to positive social relationships – it is the bond or ‘glue’ that binds people.¹ A socially cohesive society is one which works towards the wellbeing of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility.²

Compared to other countries, Australia has a remarkable degree of social cohesion given its diversity. However, maintaining this cohesion can be a challenge.

Rapid social change, particularly in growth areas, can result in disharmony between newly arrived groups and established communities. Social tensions in the wider community can also play out at the local level.

Local governments are at the centre of this ever-changing environment. They know and understand their communities better than any other level of government. They deliver economic, environmental and social outcomes across a range of areas which affect community cohesion. As such, they are well placed to implement initiatives to reap the benefits of stronger, more resilient and productive communities.
Get your local government ready

Good practice involves local government making a commitment to build social cohesion and then implementing the policies and processes to support this.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key steps</th>
<th>What this means</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Measure social cohesion</td>
<td>Establish a measure or benchmark such as the Scanlon-Monash Index</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commit to social cohesion as a priority</td>
<td>Use strategic planning to align policies, actions and performance indicators</td>
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</table>
| Assess readiness and build capacity                      | Assess:  
- Roles and responsibilities for social cohesion  
- Recruitment policies and processes  
- The existing capacity of elected members and staff |
| Embed social cohesion objectives in organisational policies and processes | Include areas such as policy, organisational culture, standards and protocols, planning, systems, communications and training |

Measure social cohesion using the Scanlon-Monash Index

The Scanlon-Monash Index can be used either in its entirety or by using one or more domain (especially belonging; acceptance and rejection, legitimacy; and worth) to measure social cohesion.

Checklist to audit current policies and procedures

Use the checklist in the online resource to conduct an audit of policies and procedures to ensure they support social cohesion objectives.

Examples of good practice in local government

City of Sydney, NSW – Uses a Community Wellbeing Indicators Framework to measure progress towards social cohesion

City of Fremantle, Western Australia – Elected decision-makers initiated an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment target as part of an Indigenous Employment Policy and Indigenous Employment Action Plan

City of Greater Dandenong, Victoria – Established a Community Safety Advisory Committee to improve safety in public spaces
Engage the community to understand the issues

Local governments need to understand their communities and where there is potential for tensions to arise between different groups.

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<tr>
<td>Know the community</td>
<td>Understand the characteristics of the people who live and work in the area and if and how this might change over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage the community</td>
<td>Identify existing or potential areas for development and build on current strengths</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be representative and inclusive</td>
<td>Ensure all voices are heard</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identify the issues</td>
<td>Determine whether there are, or whether there is potential for, tensions which could undermine social cohesion</td>
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Templates to assess and understand the community

Use the templates in the online resource to:

- Map your community and assess its demographic diversity. This template can be used internally or as part of discussions with the community.
- Uncover potential issues which may cause conflict now or in the future. This template can be used in focus groups, included in a manual or used in a phone or online survey.

Examples of good practice in local government

City of Greater Geraldton, Western Australia – Engaged diverse and remote communities to ensure inclusion and build social cohesion as part of a deliberative democracy process

Logan City Council, Queensland – Worked in partnership with Queensland Rugby Union to keep young people at school and use sport to build meaningful and more cohesive relationships between Pacific Islander communities and other cultural groups

City of Charles Sturt, South Australia – Has a Cultural Diversity Policy and a website with customised tools which can be used to undertake cultural and demographic mapping of the region’s diversity

Canterbury City Council, NSW – Has an Advocacy in Community Services Policy to ensure that vulnerable people within the community have access to information about Council services and opportunities
Build long term partnerships

Building social cohesion requires strong partnerships with business, community groups, the police, other local agencies and local governments.

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<tr>
<td>Identify potential partners across a</td>
<td>Understand which partners could help build social</td>
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<tr>
<td>range of sectors</td>
<td>cohesion now and in the future</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engage partners</td>
<td>Develop a strategy for making initial contact then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>building relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work with partners to identify issues,</td>
<td>Create collaborative working relationships to</td>
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<tr>
<td>show leadership and take action</td>
<td>respond to issues of concern to the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure partnerships exist for the</td>
<td>Keep track of changes in personnel and nurture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>long term</td>
<td>relationships formally and informally over time</td>
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Establishing long term partnerships

Local government experience shows:

- Establishing and maintaining effective partnerships requires a long term commitment
- Keep track of changes in personnel in stakeholder agencies – partnerships thrive on person-to-person contact
- Strong partnerships also need organisational commitment to ensure longevity.

Examples of good practice in local government

**Rural City of Murray Bridge, South Australia** – Participates in the Murraylands Multicultural Migration and Settlement Committee which provides interagency support for new arrivals

**Hindmarsh Shire, Victoria** – Worked with a local employer to increase access to jobs for the Karen community

**City of Greater Bendigo, Victoria** – Supported establishment of the Bendigo Interfaith Council to increase acceptance of different religions given the changing profile of the community
**Take place-based, targeted action**

Actions to build social cohesion need a local focus and should meet the specific needs of the community.

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<td>Build the capacity of the community</td>
<td>Empower the community to participate in planning and implementing activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be prepared</td>
<td>Work with partners to develop a plan which can be quickly activated if necessary to respond to a situation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be targeted</td>
<td>Learn from others but tailor programs to meet specific needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engage young people</td>
<td>Enable young people to feel connected to their community and provide safe spaces for them to interact</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support bystander action</td>
<td>Develop or use existing programs to support bystanders to safely and effectively respond to racism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop media and communications</td>
<td>Use multiple media and different types of targeted messaging to build social cohesion</td>
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**Resources to support bystander action against racism**

- **Australian Human Rights Commission**: Adapt the *Tips for Bystanders* to use with your community. See: https://itstopswithme.humanrights.gov.au/what-can-you-do/speakup

**Examples of good practice in local government**

- **Parramatta City Council, NSW** – Has a dedicated Community Capacity Building Team
- **Shire of Katanning, Western Australia** – Has targeted programs aimed at engaging young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- **City of Darebin, Victoria** – Launched a Say No to Racism training package with a manual and DVD for the community to address racism via bystander action
Evaluate and share outcomes

Local governments should evaluate their social cohesion efforts to ensure resources are allocated efficiently and effectively.

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<td>Develop an evaluation framework</td>
<td>Work with the community to identify how to measure the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of actions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collect evaluation data</td>
<td>Consider what data will be appropriate to support the evaluation objectives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Review the outcomes achieved</td>
<td>Draw conclusions about whether, and how, social cohesion was improved in your area as a result of your actions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Share experiences</td>
<td>Help others learn from your experiences in terms of the process and the outcomes</td>
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Collecting evaluation data
Consider what sources can provide data, including:

- Community surveys (about attitudes towards different cultures, experiences of racism)
- Audits of policies and procedures
- Focus groups with specific communities or organisations
- Key informant interviews with community leaders.

Examples of good practice in local government

City of Stirling, Western Australia – Evaluated its social cohesion programs to identify success factors for future projects

Brimbank City Council, Victoria – Obtained formal feedback from participants in its program to encourage participation in civic and community life by people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities

VicHealth’s Localities Embracing and Accepting Diversity (LEAD) program – Identified recommendations for programs to build social cohesion in diverse communities
The Building social cohesion in our communities online resource was developed by the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government for the Australian Human Rights Commission under the National Anti-Racism Strategy.

The online resource is available at www.acelg.org.au/socialcohesion

ACELG is creating a community of practice around social cohesion and would welcome any local government case studies.

Please submit them at: social.cohesion@acelg.org.au

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Endnotes
