



How can local governments and Indigenous communities foster social connectedness 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.

Actions can include planning and consultation, implementing bylaw and policy changes, and supporting programs and partnerships with community stakeholders. The specific actions recommended in this guide are compiled from evidence-based best practices and promising innovations that are showing results in Canadian communities.



Healthy People



Healthy Society



Healthy Environments

Social Connectedness 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 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),¹ a lower prevalence of mental illness,² and more opportunities for sustained and secure employment.³ Social support is also important for buffering the effects of an adverse event or stressful life circumstance.⁴ Research shows that belonging to social groups and networks is just as important a predictor of health as are diet and exercise.⁵ In fact, social isolation, particularly among seniors, is a factor in the development of chronic illness⁶ and is as strong a factor in early death as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.⁷

Although 68% of British Columbians feel a strong or very strong sense of belonging to their local community, a significant percentage (32%) do not.⁸ 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.⁹

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,¹⁰ people connecting with the services and support they need,¹¹ strengthened resilience during emergency events, increased volunteering¹² and a stronger sense of community pride.¹³

“Belonging to social groups and networks is just as important a predictor of health as diet and exercise.”



The Village of Queen Charlotte enjoyed a day of celebration to mark the completion of its Spirit Square. photo Courtesy Province of BC, flickr.com/photos/bcgovphotos

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' 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."¹⁵

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*¹⁶ 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.



Did You Know?

In 2013, the McCreary Centre Society's province-wide *Adolescent Health Survey*¹⁴ 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%)

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*¹⁷ 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.

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*¹⁸ 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.

Actions Local Governments Can Take



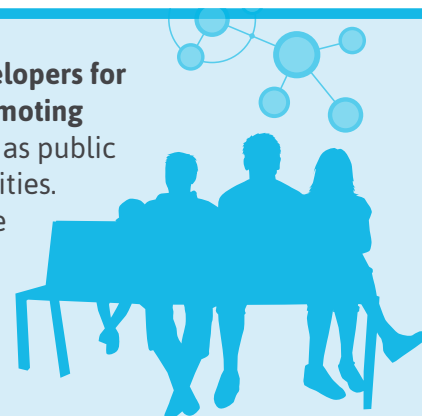
Policies

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"¹⁹ and "attracting people to neighbourhood and large-scale gathering places with art, music, and spoken word."²⁰

Offer tax incentives to developers for the inclusion of spaces promoting social connectedness, such as public squares or community facilities. These facilities may include community centres, parks, libraries, child-care centres, recreation centres and affordable housing.



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

The City of Kelowna's Strong Neighbourhood Project was initiated "to increase citizen level of attachment to the community by being a catalyst in inspiring neighbourhoods that foster a culture of connection and engagement."²¹ The program continues to build connection and engagement in neighbourhoods through the various programs and resources.



- **Strong Neighbourhoods Webpage:** offers a resource hub with information on toolkits, neighbourhood events, and City services.
- **Neighbourhood Grant Program:** supports small-scale, community-driven projects that foster connections at a neighbourhood level. There are no grant deadlines - neighbourhoods can submit an application at any time!
- **Good Neighbourhood Toolkit:** provides tips on how to meet and develop relationships between neighbours.
- **Neighbourhood Events Program:** supports resident-initiated neighbourhood events with planning tips and help from Neighbourhood Development Coordinators.
- **Neighbourhoods in Action:** shares stories and inspiring projects from neighbourhoods across Kelowna.

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 social connections.

Example Vancouver's "Hey Neighbour" program supports two live-in "community concierges" who help bridge relationships between residents in rental buildings, promote involvement in activities & events, and build capacity for other residents to assist in community-building.

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 video²² 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."²³

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 non-profits 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 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 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. Indigenous communities, ethnic diversity) in planning culturally safe and relevant engagement opportunities.



Fort St. James and Nak'azdli First Nation's block party.
photo courtesy District of Fort St James

Resources

[Neighbourhood Learning Centres](#) Government of British Columbia, 2015

[Building Neighbourhood Social Resilience](#) City of Vancouver, 2014

[Strengthening Neighbourhood Resilience: Opportunities for Communities and Local Government and Resilient Streets Toolkit](#) Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria, 2013

[The Impact of Social Isolation on Seniors' Quality of Life and Well-being](#) Government of Canada, National Seniors Council, 2015

[Growing Old Alone: The Rise of Social Isolation as Canada Ages](#) Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, 2014

[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

[Social Cohesion: International Initiatives for Cities](#) Parliament of Canada, Political and Social Affairs Division, 2007

[Connections and Engagement](#) Vancouver Foundation, 2012

[Connect and Engage: A Survey of Metro Vancouver 2017](#) Vancouver Foundation, 2017

[Community Organization Checklist](#) Vancouver Foundation, 2017

[Healthy Living – Public Policy Makes a Difference: Social Cohesion](#) Vancouver Coastal Health, 2013

[Social Connectedness and Health](#) Wilder Foundation, 2012

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5. Ibid.
6. A. 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.
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10. M. Marmot and R. Wilkinson, *Social Determinants of Health* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
11. Ibid., Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Health and Behavior.
12. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
13. Ibid., M. Marmot and R. Wilkinson.
14. McCreary Centre Society, *2013 Adolescent Health Survey (AHS) Reports* (2013).
15. District of Squamish, *Downtown Neighbourhood Plan* (2008), 24.
16. City of Richmond, *Richmond Community Wellness Strategy 2010-2015* (2010).
17. Victoria Foundation, *Vital Signs Reports* (2014).
18. City of Richmond, *Building Our Social Future: A Social Development Strategy for Richmond 2013-2022* (2013).
19. City of Burnaby, *Burnaby Social Sustainability Strategy* (2011), 66.
20. City of Burnaby, *Burnaby Social Sustainability Strategy* (2011), 68.
21. City of Kelowna, *Strong Neighbourhoods Project: Community Stakeholders Workshop*, June 17, 2014.
22. City of Abbotsford, *Abbotsford Neighbours Day 2014* (2014).
23. City of Vancouver, *A Healthy City for All: Vancouver's Healthy City Strategy 2014-2025 Phase 1* (2014), 14.



More Information

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

Health authorities can support local governments and Indigenous communities by providing advice and expertise, resources for local government staff and elected officials to develop healthy public policy, community health profiles, and opportunities and partnerships to work together on joint healthy living actions. You may already have relationships with your health authority. If not, up-to-date contact information for your local health authority lead is available at www.planh.ca.

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PlanH creates healthier communities by supporting partnerships across sectors, providing learning opportunities, resources, and consultation, and facilitating leading-edge practices and collaborative local action.

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