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Creating Opportunities Together

Strengthening Civic Health & Social Connection: Immediate Actions for NSW

A Practical Guide to Reducing Loneliness, Strengthening Communities, and Embedding Social Prescribing

This document outlines some immediate, achievable steps the NSW Government can take to reduce loneliness, increase social and civic capital, and embed social prescribing into everyday life. These recommendations are cost-effective, practical, and necessary to rebuild the social infrastructure that keeps our communities strong.

Key Actions NSW Must Take Now

1. Jumpstart People and Communities

Problem: People want to connect, but the system doesn't make it easy. Many don't know where to go, and existing support structures are fragmented.

Solutions:

- Fund Social Prescribing Link Workers – Every GP, pharmacist and trusted community member should be able to refer people to social activities, volunteering opportunities, and community support.
- Support Neighbourhood Centres & Local Networks – These are the heart of civic life and must be protected, funded, and expanded.
- Simplify Volunteer Pathways – Right now, lengthy induction processes discourage participation. Cut the red tape so people can start contributing immediately.

✓ Example: A retired firefighter wants to mentor young people but has to complete six separate training sessions in addition to screening before he can even start. Most people don't have the patience for that.

2. Make Community Assets Easy to Use

Problem: We protect public spaces instead of making them easily available for social connection. Schools, libraries, and council buildings often sit empty after hours, while community groups struggle to find fit-for-purpose places to connect.

Solutions:

- Unlock Schools, Libraries & Public Buildings for After-Hours Use – Community spaces should be available, accessible, and easy to book.
- Reduce Approval Barriers for Community Events – Holding a local music night, book club, or workshop should not require endless paperwork.
- Ensure Public Spaces Prioritise People Over Bureaucracy – Remove excessive fees and restrictions that prevent local use.

✓ Example: A chess club wants to meet at the local library one evening per week, but the library closes at 5 pm and requires a paid security guard to stay open. That makes no sense.

3. Reward Businesses That Build Community—Not Those That Extract from It

Problem: We reward businesses that extract value while ignoring those that invest in community wellbeing.

Solutions:

- Payroll Tax Breaks & Incentives for businesses that:
 - ✓ Hire locally
 - ✓ Provide free spaces for community events
 - ✓ Sponsor local sports, arts, and cultural programs
- A Social Infrastructure Levy on businesses that:
 - ✗ Automate human interaction (e.g., replacing jobs with self-checkouts)
 - ✗ Rely on gig work without community investment
 - ✗ Extract profit without giving back to local communities

✓ Example: A local café hosts a seniors' morning tea, a book club, and a live music night—but gets no recognition for its social impact, while a multinational delivery app profits by eroding in-person interactions without the expectation of investing locally.

4. Cut Red Tape That Prevents Participation

Problem: Right now, it's easier to book an Airbnb than to organise a local event. Community groups and associations drown in bureaucracy before they even get started.

Solutions:

- Safe Harbour Protections for grassroots community activities—reduce compliance burdens for volunteers.
- Universal Community Event Insurance – The government should cover basic insurance for volunteer-led events so organisers aren't put off by liability fears.
- Simplify Permits for Local Events – Right now, it can be harder to run a street BBQ than to get some planning approvals through. That must change.

✓ Example: A neighbourhood group wants to hold a picnic in a park but needs to secure a costly event permit, public liability insurance, and food safety certifications. It's easier to just not do it—and that's the problem.

5. Treat Social Infrastructure Like Roads and Hospitals—Because It's Just as Essential

Problem: We invest in hospitals to treat illness, but we fail to invest in the social infrastructure that prevents it. Every time we lose a community centre, a golf course, or a lawn bowls club, we lose a piece of social health infrastructure.

Solutions:

- Protect social assets like Neighbourhood Centres, Men’s Sheds & Lawn Bowls Clubs – These spaces are critical for older adults, social prescribing, and community life.
- Require Developers to Replace Lost Social Assets – If a development removes a community space, it must create a new one.
- Embed Civic Infrastructure in Planning & Budgeting – Just as we fund roads and public transport, we must fund civic spaces.

✓ Example: A council closes a community hall to cut costs—but a year later, social isolation spikes, local crime rises, and mental health services are overwhelmed. The cost of neglect is always higher than the cost of investment.

Immediate Steps by Government Department

Department	Immediate Action for Civic Health & Social Prescribing
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund social prescribing link workers in every community. • Expand preventative and protective community-based mental health and chronic disease programs.
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open schools and TAFEs for community use after hours. • Embed civic participation into school curriculums. • Replace work experience placements like stocking shelves with civic internships in councils, community-managed organisations, or faith-based institutions.
Communities & Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand funding for social assets like Neighbourhood Centres, Men’s Sheds, and local gathering spaces. • Reduce bureaucracy for volunteers.
Planning & Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Require ‘third places’ and social assets in every new development. • Prioritise walkability and connected suburbs. • Ensure developers must replace any lost community space.
Finance & Procurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritise businesses that contribute to civic health in government contracts. • Fund councils based on social outcomes, not just roads and rates.
Transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subsidise travel for community participation. • Design transport networks to support social interaction, not just efficiency.
Arts & Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure local arts programs are connected to social prescribing networks. • Provide grants for community-driven arts projects
Sport & Recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open up public sporting facilities for broader community use. • Support sports clubs as key connection points.

Conclusion

These are real, tangible actions that can strengthen communities, reduce loneliness, and embed social prescribing into everyday life.

We need immediate, practical steps. This document provides them.

Let's stop treating loneliness as an individual failing and start recognising it as a systemic issue—one that we can fix, together.

NSW has the opportunity to lead. Let's act now.

Australian Social Prescribing Institute for Research and Education
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