

Meaningful *Connections*  
Stronger *Communities*

# Guiding Principles for Creating Meaningful Social Connections



Developed by:

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Powered by  
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SOUTH AUSTRALIA 

for Office for Ageing Well  
and Wellbeing SA

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Developed by  
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based on findings from the  
*Meaningful Connections  
Stronger Communities* project,  
for Office for Ageing Well  
and Wellbeing SA

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# Contents

Background \_\_\_\_\_ 4

What we found \_\_\_\_\_ 6

Guiding Principles for Creating  
Meaningful Social Connections \_\_\_\_ 8

*Framework for suggested  
action on guiding principles* \_\_\_\_\_ 10

*Connector roles* \_\_\_\_\_ 12

*Spaces and places* \_\_\_\_\_ 14

*Activities* \_\_\_\_\_ 18

*Accessibility* \_\_\_\_\_ 20

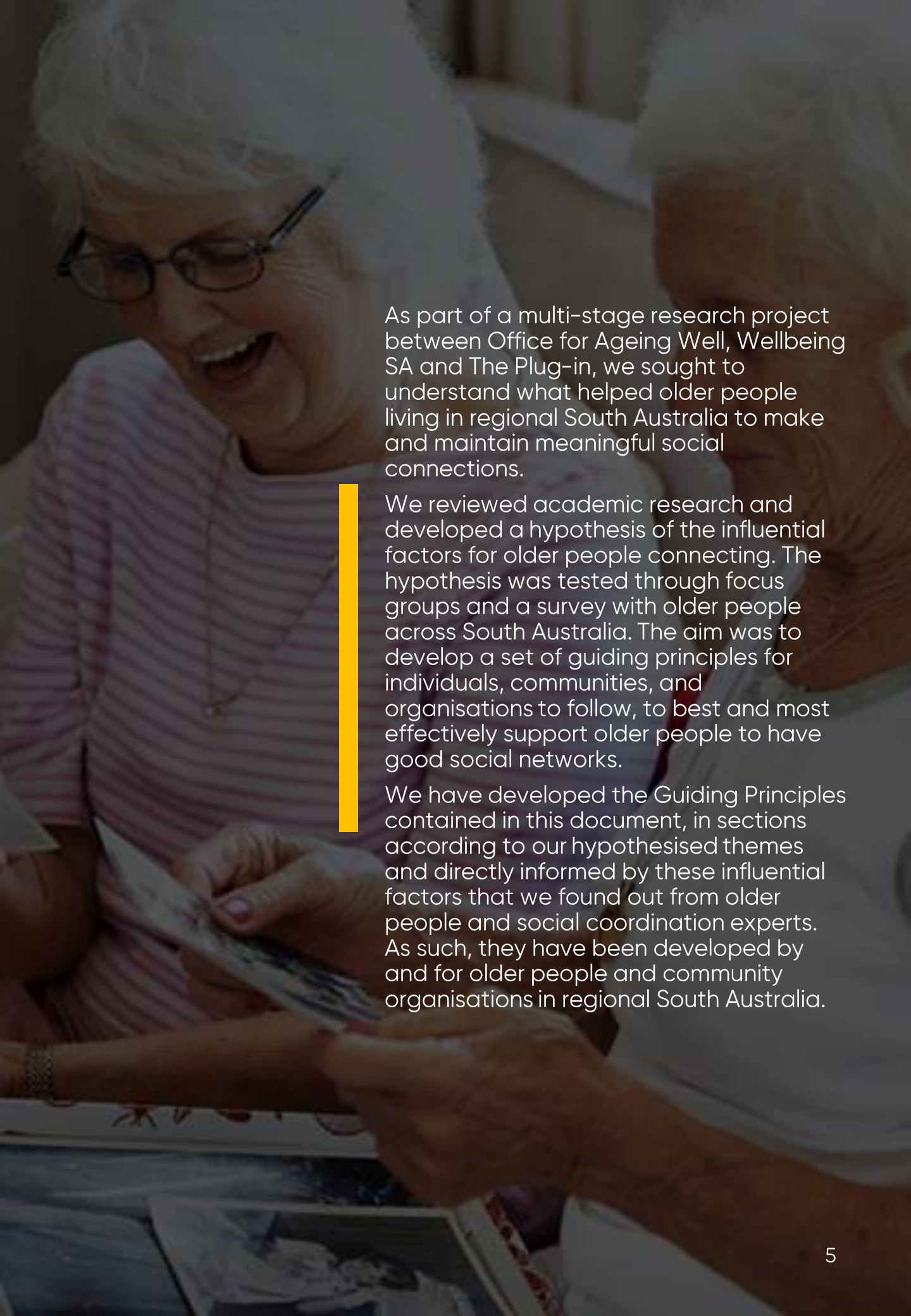


# Background

It is widely documented, both in Australia and internationally, that meaningful social connections are important in shaping wellbeing.

A lack of connections and the absence of a feeling of belonging are associated with a range of poor mental, physical, and socio-economic outcomes for people, their families, and their communities. This is particularly the case for older people due to a range of social and personal factors that can contribute to their health risk.



A photograph of a group of older people, including a woman with glasses and a striped shirt, looking at a document together. The image is dimmed and serves as a background for the text.

As part of a multi-stage research project between Office for Ageing Well, Wellbeing SA and The Plug-in, we sought to understand what helped older people living in regional South Australia to make and maintain meaningful social connections.

We reviewed academic research and developed a hypothesis of the influential factors for older people connecting. The hypothesis was tested through focus groups and a survey with older people across South Australia. The aim was to develop a set of guiding principles for individuals, communities, and organisations to follow, to best and most effectively support older people to have good social networks.

We have developed the Guiding Principles contained in this document, in sections according to our hypothesised themes and directly informed by these influential factors that we found out from older people and social coordination experts. As such, they have been developed by and for older people and community organisations in regional South Australia.

# What we found

Across the state, older people found the following factors influential for helping them to both maintain social connections but also create new meaningful connections in their local community:

an individual's willingness and openness to make the effort to make new social connections

the friendliness and openness of a community/town

the importance of people who filled connector roles in the community and their ability to help older people get involved

the availability of activities that interest older people and provide them with a purpose, including engaging and rewarding volunteer opportunities

the presence of welcoming places for community connection and having regular incidental interactions with others at public places

having access to information about ways to connect in the local area and safe and reliable transport to attend opportunities

**Connection means different things to different people. For older people, meaningful connections are dynamic and evolving and can be impacted by numerous factors, therefore a one-size-fits-all approach cannot be applied.**



# Guiding Principles for Creating Meaningful Social Connections

*Key foundation underpinning  
guiding principles:*

Older people are at the centre of the process including planning, development, delivery, and assessment.

A person-centered approach is key to ensuring older people have both agency and ownership to encourage active participation.

**Pillars  
for  
Action**



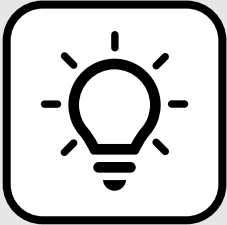
The four interconnected pillars of Connector roles, Activities, Spaces and Places, and Accessibility need to be considered to best support communities and older people to make meaningful social connections.



*\*Accessibility in this case covers transport access and information access. These pillars should also be considered from the perspective of Disability Access and Inclusion.*

# Framework for suggested action on guiding principles

Under each pillar, there is a framework for suggested actions that support these. The framework for each action area has three elements:



### **Research Insight**

A key finding from our research with older South Australians across different regions and with community representatives from a range of organisations



### **Action: What you as an individual can do:**

Suggested actions based on what older participants in our research said worked for them to support their own connectedness or to assist others with connections



### **Action: What your organisation/group can do:**

Suggested actions based on what older participants and external organisations said was needed to support people to make and maintain social connections



## Connector roles



*Community connectors are people who link older people together. These roles are often informal but are the crucial pillar for older people making connections in communities and should be celebrated and championed.*



## Research insight



'Community Connectors' are naturally occurring members of the community. They are crucial to helping older people feel informed and engaged.

Moving to a new regional town can be challenging, especially if it is a town with a high population of people who have lived there since their youth.

Volunteering is an important way older people are making connections - the role of the volunteer has a social reciprocity, benefiting both the volunteers and the services or people they are supporting in their work.

## Action:



### What you as an individual can do:

If you identify someone you think might be socially isolated or lonely:

- Listen to their story
- Invite them to a program / activity / group
- Offer to travel to the program / activity / group together if you/they are able

Include newcomers by informing them of local places for connection (community centre, library).

Look out for new people in the community and make an effort to talk to them - practice engaging with people that you don't know.

Connect with Volunteering SA&NT, Southern Volunteering or Northern Volunteering to find opportunities near you. Base your volunteer role on what interests you and how long you can commit to the role.



### What your organisation/ group can do:

Champion and celebrate 'connectors' in the community. For example, a connector day to celebrate and encourage connectors in the community.

Ensure new residents are informed about connection opportunities. For example, provide welcome pack delivered directly to new residents' homes, offering information on opportunities to connect.

To prioritise a person-centred approach, when possible, programs / activities / groups be led or supported by volunteers. With volunteers having an active role in the direction and day-to-day running and being empowered in their roles.



## Spaces and places



*Welcoming and inclusive organised places for connection are key to providing older people with safe, familiar spaces to make connections. Incidental places for connection provide important opportunities for older people to have informal connections with others in the community.*

## Research insight



Simply getting out of the house is often the first step to connecting but it can be a challenge for some older people due to social anxiety or being from a different background to others.

Connections with neighbours and other people living locally are important to older people to create a sense of belonging.

Frequently visited places such as shopping centres are key for incidental connection opportunities – these interactions are important for older people having a sense of belonging.

## Action:



### What you as an individual can do:

Pick up the phone to chat with friends or family. There are also services for people who are interested in a social chat such as Red Cross TeleChat.

Try to keep in mind that people may be struggling with social anxiety – they may need your help!

Meaningful connections can happen in your front yard or local neighbourhood. Go for a short walk around the neighbourhood or be in the front yard for a 'hello' opportunity with a neighbour.

Take opportunities for conversation when you are doing your regular shopping or attending appointments – you don't know whose story you'll hear or what new connection you can make.



### What your organisation/ group can do:

Recognise that social anxiety is a common barrier and actively seek to help older people overcome this barrier. For example, when advertising places for connection, offer a phone number to call or a call back service so they have the opportunity to talk to someone about attending.

Make it clear that everyone is welcome – active outreach may be needed for those from diverse backgrounds, e.g. First Nations, culturally and linguistically diverse or LGBTI+.

Prioritise public spaces to support older people meeting and engaging with their neighbours. For example, provide accessible footpaths and encourage 'neighbour' events in public spaces.

Consider the design of public spaces and places that will encourage extended conversation for older people. For example, provide benches or places to sit.

## Research insight



Community centres and libraries are considered key places for connection as they are open and accessible for all.

Digital ways of connecting can provide older people an alternative and effective way to make meaningful connections – both with locals and families who do not live nearby.

## Action:



### What you as an individual can do:

Make time to visit a community space that you have never been to before, taking a friend with you.

If someone has not been to a community space you are familiar with, offer to take them along.

Connect with other locals via social media such as Facebook 'Buy Nothing' groups.

Initiate or maintain regular video chats, chat conversations or phone calls with family who you are not able to see in person regularly.



### What your organisation/ group can do:

The following features can help to make community spaces open and accessible for all:

- Variety of activities to suit a range of interests
- Variety of spaces for different activities (including indoor and outdoor, large areas for art)
- Provide multiple volunteer opportunities for people to engage
- Friendly staff – including a meet and greet person for activities
- Ensure there is a low or no cost to attend

When advertising or information sharing about programs / activities / groups for older people, ensure advertisement has a digital presence, complementary to an offline presence.







# Activities



*Participation in activities is the main way through which older people are forming and maintaining meaningful connections. Activities to encourage connection should be purpose and interest driven, rather than positioned as 'loneliness interventions'.*



## Research insight



Activity groups and clubs are a main way that older people are connecting with people in their community. People are most drawn to opportunities to connect which are linked to their interests – or which have a ‘purpose’ as opposed to a ‘loneliness intervention’.

Attending a new activity or a group alone can put people out of their comfort zone.

## Action:



### What you as an individual can do:

Seek out group activities that align with your interests. For example, make a list of the things that you have always wanted to learn/try ask your council or people in the community for recommendations.

If you suspect somebody is socially isolated/lonely ask them about their interests and offer to attend a relevant activity with them.

If you are concerned about attending a new activity on your own:

1. ask a friend or neighbour to attend with you
2. contact the activity / group organiser to introduce yourself and break the ice

If you notice a new person entering an activity / group, welcome them and introduce them to other attendees.



### What your organisation/ group can do:

Ensure a variety of activities are on offer. These should be directed by older people to meet their interests.

Cultural or social considerations should be made to ensure as many people can take part as possible, e.g. women’s and men’s only groups, as well as mixed groups (to include non-binary and transgender people).

To ensure new attendees feel comfortable, provide a designated ‘meet and greet’ person at activities/groups to greet new people and introduce them to others.

Advertisements for activities / groups should include a welcome message for new members to make them feel valued. They should mention the ‘meet and greet’ as reassurance for people attending alone.



# Accessibility



*Adequate access to safe and reliable transport is a key element that enables older people to participate in connection opportunities. Accessible and clear information about connection opportunities should be shared with the community via both online and offline channels, so older people are aware of opportunities in their area.*



## Research insight



Community and public transport in regional areas is limited. This can be a barrier to attending opportunities for connection if someone does not drive or have access to a personal vehicle.

If older people are driving their own car, typically they are not looking into alternative transport options. Transport options should be explored early so older people have a way to still attend connection opportunities if they are suddenly unable to drive.

## Action:



### What you as an individual can do:

If transport is a barrier for someone to attend a program / activity / group, offer to drive them if you are able.

If you do not have personal transport, contact the organiser to see if something can be arranged.

Plan for no longer driving early, exploring alternative public and community transport options.



### What your organisation/ group can do:

Consider providing transport to attendees where possible.

Locate program / activity / group in a central location, ensuring it is close to existing transport links if community or public transport is available.

Organisations to provide information on transport options to attend including walking routes, community/ public transport, advice on carpooling alternatives.

\* Noting that universal design principles should inform location of program / activity / groups in accordance with disability access and inclusion legislation.

## Research insight



The flow of information is crucial so that people can tap into opportunities for connection. Older people typically find out about connection opportunities through word of mouth.

## Action:



### What you as an individual can do:

Spread the word: tell neighbours and friends about opportunities for connections that could be of interest to them.

Ask others about programs / activities / groups that they are aware are available in the local community.



### What your organisation/ group can do:

Encourage attendees to tell others about the program / activity / group to share awareness and encourage attendance.

To reach people who are unlikely to hear via word of mouth, consider communicating with the community via multiple channels:

- A list of connection opportunities provided by councils
- Noticeboard at either shops, council or library that lists opportunities for connection.
- Dedicated Facebook page to advertise social activities.
- Advertisements or classifieds in local newspapers or newsletters delivered directly to homes or available at local supermarket
- Connect with local groups that represent diverse populations and embrace inclusivity to find the best ways to encourage involvement amongst those they represent, e.g. First Nations, culturally and linguistically diverse, LGBTI+, people living with a disability.







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