Belonging in Geelong:

A Social Inclusion Needs Analysis

Plain Language Summary

2025



CITY OF GREATER GEELONG

friends for good®



Overview



The Problem: 25% of Geelong residents feel lonely, with rates much higher for young people, people with disability, people experiencing mental ill-health, single parents and those experiencing financial hardship.



The Causes: Barriers include poor transport, cost, discrimination, inaccessible spaces, and services that don't fit people's needs.



The Solutions: Peer support, co-design, place-based programs, ongoing programs, accessible spaces, and celebrating diversity all work.



The Vision: A Geelong where everyone feels safe, welcome, and connected – where belonging is part of everyday life.

"Future Geelong feels safe, warm and inviting. It's a city where people know each other, where neighbours look out for one another, and where connection is celebrated."



The Action: Invest in long-term programs, remove barriers, listen to lived experience, and work together as a whole community.



What is Belonging and Social Inclusion?

Belonging means feeling part of your community, being connected to others, and knowing you are valued. It's about having friends, feeling safe, and knowing you matter. When people feel included, their health and wellbeing improve, and communities become stronger and happier. Social inclusion is making sure everyone can join in- no matter their background, age, ability, or income. It means having access to services, being able to take part in activities, and having a say in decisions that affect you. Inclusion is not just about being present, but about feeling welcome and respected.

Why Does This Matter in Geelong?

Geelong is a growing and changing city, with people from many different backgrounds, ages, and abilities. While there are lots of opportunities, not everyone feels connected. Many people in Geelong feel lonely or left out, even though the city is busy and full of life. Loneliness and social isolation are big issues in Australia. Nearly 1 in 4 adults in Victoria feel lonely, and this can lead to poor health, stress, and sadness. Feeling lonely or excluded can happen to anyone, but some groups are more at risk than others. This report looks at what is happening in Geelong and what people want for the future by using local data and community feedback. Its goal is to help everyone work together to make Geelong a more welcoming place where everyone belongs.

Groups at Greater Risk of Loneliness

Who Is Most at Risk in Geelong?

Some groups in Geelong face a higher risk of loneliness and exclusion. Often, people experience multiple challenges at once, which makes things even harder.

In some groups, more than half of people say they feel lonely. This includes young people, people with disability, single parents and people experiencing severe psychological distress.

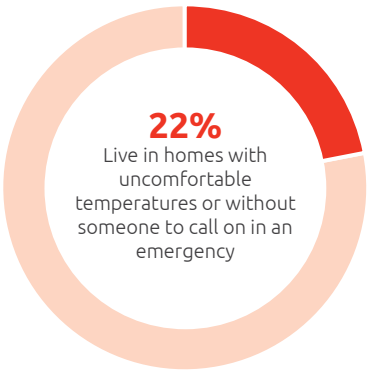
Young People



60%
18–24-year-olds report feeling lonely







- 60% of 18-24-year-olds in Geelong feel lonely, the highest of any age group.
- Young people often face stress, food insecurity, and lack safe spaces to connect.
- Young LGBTQIA+ people and those in regional areas feel even more isolated.
- Loneliness can lead to mental health problems, making it even harder to join in.



People with Disability



61%
People with long-term disability report feeling lonely





- 61% of people with a long-term disability feel lonely, compared to 23% without disability.
- Barriers include inaccessible buildings, transport, and services.
- People with disability may also face discrimination and limited opportunities for work or social activities.

People Experiencing Financial Insecurity

- Those struggling with money are more likely to feel lonely and unsafe.
- Loneliness is highest in disadvantaged suburbs like Corio and Norlane.
- People with financial stress may not be able to afford transport, activities, or even food.
- Economic hardship can make it hard to participate in community life.



Where you live matters

The suburbs with the most loneliness are:

- Corio, Norlane, North Shore: **46% feel lonely**
- New growth areas like Armstrong Creek: **42% feel lonely**

LGBTQIA+ Communities

- 39% of LGBTQIA+ people in Geelong report feeling lonely, compared to 25% of others.
- Many face discrimination and prefer safe, inclusive spaces.
- Participation in sports and religious groups is lower, possibly because they don't feel safe or welcoming, but professional and academic groups are more popular.

Older Adults

While older people reported lower loneliness overall (22% of those 55+), this might not show the full picture.

Older People at highest risk include those who:

- Live alone
- Have a disability
- Are on a low income
- Have lost a partner
- Moved into aged care

People Experiencing Mental Ill-Health



77%
People with severe psychological distress report feeling lonely

There's a strong link between poor mental health and loneliness:

- 77% of those with severe psychological distress are lonely.
- Poor mental health and loneliness often go hand in hand, making it harder to join groups or activities.
- Support groups and inclusive spaces can make a big difference.

Unpaid Carers and Single Parents

- 35% of unpaid carers feel lonely (compared to 24% of non-carers)
- 57% of single parents feel lonely. Single parents often face money stress and time pressure too.
- Caring responsibilities and financial stress make participation difficult.
- Parents of children with disability or mental health issues often feel especially isolated.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities

- Language barriers, discrimination, and unfamiliarity with services can lead to isolation.
- People from migrant or refugee backgrounds may miss familiar traditions and find it hard to connect.
- Community groups and cultural events can help build belonging. Single parents often face money stress and time pressure too.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

- Geelong has 3,562 First Nations people (1.3% of the population), which is the largest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of any Victorian council.
- These communities face ongoing impacts from colonisation, racism, and disadvantage.
- 20% of the Social Inclusion Investment Fund is allocated to First Nations people, and decisions about spending will be made in consultation with these communities.
- Culturally safe, community-led solutions are needed to support inclusion.



What Stops People from Connecting?

Many things make it hard for people in Geelong to feel included and connected. These barriers can be structural (how systems work) or social (how people treat each other).

What Stops People from Feeling Included?

Transport

- Lack of accessible buses, expensive taxis, and unreliable public transport keep people isolated.
- Some community centres are hard to reach, especially for people with disabilities or older adults.
- Financial Stress
- High costs for housing, activities, and daily living mean some can't afford to join in.
- Fees for children's programs, sports, or social events can exclude families.
- Rising cost of living makes it harder for people to participate.

Inaccessible Facilities

- Buildings may meet codes but still be hard to use for people with disabilities or older adults.
- Heavy doors, poor design, and lack of ramps or accessible toilets can keep people out.
- Spaces that are uncomfortable for people with sensory needs create barriers.
- Even well-resourced spaces can remain empty if they aren't truly inclusive.

Stigma and Discrimination

- People may feel judged or unwelcome because of their age, disability, cultural background, or identity.
- Discrimination can happen in schools, workplaces, or community groups.
- Feeling unwelcome can make people avoid joining in, even when opportunities exist.

Digital Barriers

- Complex online forms and lack of internet access at home (15.8% of houses in Greater Geelong) make it hard for some to engage.
- Not everyone has the skills or devices needed to use digital services.
- Digital exclusion can limit access to information, support, and activities.

Unreliable Programs

- Programs that end suddenly can leave people feeling more isolated.
- Consistency and continuity are important for building trust and lasting connections.

Personal Challenges

- Poor health, caring responsibilities, trauma, and language barriers can all make participation harder.
- People facing multiple challenges may need extra support to join in.

How Barriers Add Up

Often, people face multiple barriers at once. For example, a young person with disability in a low-income household faces much greater barriers than someone with just one of these challenges. A single parent working casual hours might struggle with money, time, transport, and stress all at once.

These barriers don't just affect individuals, they affect whole communities. When people can't participate, everyone loses out on their skills, ideas, and contributions.

What Helps People Feel Included?

Research and community experience show us what works. Here are the key things that help people connect and belong.

System-Level Support

To create real inclusion, we need:

- **Better Infrastructure** Reliable and accessible public transport, affordable housing, free or low-cost community spaces, and internet access for everyone.
- **Fair Planning** Using equity data to guide decisions, creating accessible public spaces, establishing community hubs in every area, and providing green spaces and parks.
- **Coordinated Approach** Everyone working together including councils, services, community groups, businesses, and residents. This means sharing information, not duplicating efforts, and making long-term commitments.
- **Fighting Discrimination** Setting clear targets for inclusion, providing training for staff and organisations, ensuring culturally safe services, and having zero tolerance for discrimination.

Program level support

- **Peer Support:** Groups where people share experiences and support each other reduce isolation.
- **Place-Based Approaches:** Programs designed for local needs and strengths work best.
- **Co-Design with Lived Experience:** Programs designed WITH the people who will use them, not FOR them.
- **Opportunities for Real Interaction:** Spaces for genuine connection build trust and belonging.
- **Sustainability and Continuity:** Long-term programs that don't end suddenly help people stay connected.
- **Accessibility and Affordability:** Free or low-cost programs and accessible spaces remove barriers.
- **Trusted Community Connectors:** People who help others find and join activities make a big difference.
- **Celebrating Diversity:** Intergenerational programs, multicultural events, and spaces where everyone feels welcome.



Local Success Stories from Geelong

Geelong has many great examples of programs that bring people together and help them feel part of their community. Here are two:

Whittington Neighbourhood House

Whittington Neighbourhood House is a warm and welcoming space where people can make friends, learn new skills and feel supported.

Many people come through the door looking for connection and leave feeling part of a community. Local programs are low-cost, close to home and designed around what people say they need.

This shows how place-based, neighbourhood programs can reduce isolation and help people feel they belong.

Ukes'n'more Community Music Group

Ukes'n'more is a long-running ukulele and singing group that meets weekly at the Grovedale Neighbourhood House.

The group focuses on fun, connection and stress relief rather than musical expertise. People come together to sing, play and share supper afterwards, creating friendships and a sense of routine.

This shows how shared activities can bring people together in simple but meaningful ways.



The Path Forward

At the community forum, people imagined a future Geelong where:

Everyone Can Participate: Reliable and accessible transport, free or low-cost programs, welcoming spaces for all ages and abilities, and easy-to-find information about what's on.

Communities Are Connected: Neighbourhood houses and community centres, safe parks and gardens, street parties and local events, and spaces for all cultures and ages to mix.

Diversity Is Celebrated: Multicultural festivals, cultural events all year, no stigma or discrimination, and everyone feels safe to be themselves.

Life Is Stable: Affordable housing, accessible mental health support, support at every life stage, and buddy systems for newcomers.



Recommendations

To create this future, we need to:

1. **Invest in Long-Term Programs:** Fund programs that last, not just short projects. Avoid programs that suddenly end and leave people isolated. Support proven initiatives to keep going.
2. **Make Information Easy to Find:** Create one central place to find out what's on. Use simple and accessible formats. Have community connectors to help people find the right fit. Provide regular updates.
3. **Listen to Lived Experience:** Co-design programs with the people who will use them. Include diverse voices in decision-making. Pay people for their expertise. Make changes based on feedback.
4. **Create Welcoming Spaces:** Invest in community centres and neighbourhood houses. Make parks and public spaces accessible. Ensure spaces are affordable or free to use. Design with inclusion from the start.
5. **Celebrate What Makes Us Different:** Support festivals and cultural events. Create opportunities for generations to mix. Fund programs that bring diverse people together. Recognise and respect all identities.
6. **Focus on Those Most At Risk:** Prioritise support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, young people, people with disability, LGBTQIA+ communities, unpaid carers and single parents, people experiencing mental health challenges, culturally diverse communities, older adults living alone, and those experiencing financial hardship.

Together we can build a Greater Geelong that is safe, warm, and inviting for all.

For more information

Friends for Good Inc.
ABN 45 390 315 758

Ph: (03) 9691 6300
admin@friendsforgood.org.au

friends for good®

To find out more or to donate, please visit
friendsforgood.org.au