

CONCEPT NOTES

2026 National Social Cohesion And Inclusion Conference

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Session #1: Constructive and Unifying Dialogue

A socially cohesive society works towards the wellbeing of all its members. It promotes inclusion, belonging and trust, fosters progress through participation and dialogue, and offers everyone the opportunity to flourish and contribute to a just and prosperous society. It aims to continually strengthen the relationships that exist between peoples, communities and institutions.

In an era marked by divisions and tribalism, where conversations often descend into contention rather than understanding, it can be difficult to have the kind of dialogue that builds trust, identifies shared values and aspirations, and enables collective responses to increasingly complex challenges. Adversarial methods of debate, partisanship, or protest are not conducive to building consensus, and bringing together only those who are likeminded to discuss societal issues, does not allow for shared understanding to arise nor generate the collective will to act.

Questions:

1) How do we, in a society where there are diversity of views, perspectives and values (e.g. cultural, religious, ideological), have dialogue that brings about greater shared understanding, builds trust and strengthen relationships, and allows for meaningful collaborative action?

2) How does drawing on our diversity and an orientation towards seeking a shared understanding of our shared social reality in dialogue settings strengthen decision-making?

3) What are the characteristics and principles that can guide this type of dialogue among individuals, communities and institutions? What assumptions and systems may need to be changed to reflect these?

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Session #2: Extending Participation through neighbourhoods and communities

Communities are a vital element of our society, whether defined by age, culture, ethnicity, religion, geography, ideology or other affiliations. They are important sources of connection, belonging and resilience that can support social cohesion across the country. However, division can grow when people and communities lack opportunities for regular and meaningful interactions – merely living side by side.

Communities can serve as systems of support for their members. They can be places of inclusion and belonging, can contribute to a sense of purpose, and can foster healthy patterns of thought and behaviour. In a vibrant community members come together regularly to draw on the range of perspectives, knowledge, experiences, skills and talents they all share, to address social and community needs. Communities, including those of new arrivals, have much to offer to help strengthen social cohesion and have a great desire to be actively engaged. Many are learning about building relationships with other communities, actively building bridges and finding points of connection on which meaningful interactions can be built.

The neighbourhood provides a unique opportunity for genuine relationships and meaningful interactions to take place - built around a shared identity of 'neighbour' and connection to place. In a neighbourhood, diverse people can come together and through ongoing and unifying dialogue, reflection, and action, identify shared values and aspirations, and work towards making small, but meaningful contributions to social change - such as transforming the neighbourhood into an inclusive and safer space. All can contribute, weaving together their intergenerational, intercultural and interfaith wisdom, and their range of experiences, skills and talents.

Questions:

1) What role are communities playing to strengthen social cohesion in Australia? What are some of the capacities, talents and skills that they are learning to draw upon? How are they responding to challenges or barriers in constructive and inclusive ways?

2) What opportunities do communities and neighbourhoods provide for regular interactions with others? What do such interactions look like for them to be effective in building genuine relationships amongst individuals and communities?

3) What are neighbourhoods and communities learning about working together and drawing on their collective strengths? How does it involve the participation of all community members as well as community representatives?

4) How are neighbourhoods and communities taking greater ownership of initiatives and processes that strengthen social cohesion in the areas where they have influence? What are institutions and organisations learning about working creatively with communities and neighbourhoods to contribute to social cohesion?

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Session #3 – Redefining Relationships across Leadership and Institutions

Strengthening social cohesion requires empowering, reciprocal and collaborative relationships between people, communities and institutions.

Yet institutions and organisations have inherited models of leadership where holding knowledge, decision-making and authority tend to sit at the centre of their functioning. People and communities can consequently become recipients of decisions, services or programs rather than active participants shaping the direction of their lives, their communities and society at large.

Emerging models of leadership will need to be defined by the qualities and attitudes that allow for genuine relationship building, collaboration, working shoulder-to-shoulder with others, capacity-building and greater participation, and for greater ownership by individuals and communities.

Questions:

1) How might we rethink the relationship between institutions and the individuals and communities they serve? What would it mean to place greater emphasis on *how* institutions relate to individuals and communities, rather than only *what* they do?

2) How can leaders and institutions create the conditions for people and communities to exercise greater agency, unlock their capacities and potential, and support greater participation? What might it look like for leaders and institutions to move beyond doing things *for* people and communities but rather to learn alongside them?

3) How can leaders and institution support individuals and communities to be meaningfully involved in shaping the questions, priorities and decisions that affect their lives? What type of dialogue and consultation allows for a genuine process of thinking, learning and acting together?

4) In walking alongside, supporting and empowering individuals and communities, how can leaders and institutions help them to grow and strengthen relationships and meaningful interactions with others? How can they remain vigilant not to reinforce conceptions of 'us' and 'them?'

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Session #4 – Drawing on the Capacities of Youth

Young people regularly show themselves as future-orientated and are eager to play their part in building a more inclusive, fairer and cohesive Australia. They show higher levels of acceptance when compared to the broader population. Many draw on more than one culture, language and tradition in shaping their identity and worldview, making them open to adaptation and flexibility. They are able to embrace diverse beliefs, values and practices while discarding ideas that are outdated - a capacity vital for navigating our current reality and shaping our future together.

While youth possess qualities that lend themselves towards strengthening social cohesion, these are rarely recognised in how we describe young people in society, nor reflected in the engagement opportunities presented to them. Our systems tend to silo young people's engagement around narrow 'youth' issues and as 'problems' to be solved. Opportunities for participation tend to be tokenistic and young people are often expected to lead with little support, disconnected from the natural contexts where they build capacity organically - their homes, their neighbourhoods and their communities, and the intergenerational relationships these foster.

As we shift the way we describe young people, and remove barriers to their participation, their perspectives and experiences can enrich society and help redefine the values and practices around which communities coalesce and institutions flourish.

Questions:

1. What are some of the distinctive contributions and capacities that young people bring to strengthen social cohesion, within their homes, communities and in institutions across Australia?

2. What makes these contributions important and effective? In what ways can these reshape our understanding of social cohesion, inclusion, belonging, and identity?

3. What can society do to support the full engagement of youth? What opportunities are available to us? What are the barriers (systemic, conceptual, or otherwise) that limit the participation of youth?

4. How do we recognise and support the role that young people play in strengthening social cohesion, while also recognising that society flourishes when every person can be supported to contribute meaningfully?

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