

2026

# BELONGING MATTERS

The social connection report

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Executive summary

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A photograph of four diverse individuals standing outdoors in a natural setting. From left to right: a man in a dark jacket, a man in a white kurta and blue turban, a man in a wetsuit holding a surfboard, and a woman in a dark jacket and sunglasses. A circular orange logo is overlaid on the bottom right of the image.

The  
Municipal  
Association  
of Victoria

**Victoria stands at a crossroads. The wellbeing, prosperity and social cohesion of our state depend on the strength of our communities and the capacity of local systems to adapt and respond to accelerating environmental, social, cultural and economic shifts.**

**Local government is the first tier of government where democracy meets daily life – where trust and resilience is built through services, spaces, and connections that sustain over seven million Victorians.**

**Our purpose is to mobilise action that supports Victorian councils to create cities, regions, and towns that are thriving, resilient and inclusive communities.**

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## **Acknowledgement of Country**

The Municipal Association of Victoria acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria, and recognise their continuing connection to lands, waters, and culture. We pay our respects to Elders past and present who carry the stories, traditions, cultures, and aspirations of First Peoples, and who forged the path ahead for emerging leaders.

We support local government's commitment to strengthen relationships with Victoria's Aboriginal communities and for it to encourage greater unity, knowledge, cultural awareness and respect for the first occupants of our land – through its strong community links and local representation.

## **Appreciation and thanks**

The MAV is very grateful for the contributions to this report by Dr Stephen Carbone and Professor Rosemary Calder, Stella McNamara and Tyler Nichols, the Australian Health Policy Collaboration team at Victoria University.

We also acknowledge with thanks feedback and advice from MAV's Health and Wellbeing Advisory Panel.

## **Content warning**

People with lived experience of mental ill-health are especially acknowledged, along with their families and friends who support them. Please note there are references to suicide in this report. If you require help as a result of reading this report, please contact Lifeline Australia on 13 11 14 or chat online – [lifeline.org.au](https://www.lifeline.org.au)

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This report has been prepared by the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV). The MAV is the statutory peak body for local government in Victoria, representing all 79 municipalities within the state.

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**Cover image:** MAVlab Innovation Case Study Library, Bass Coast Shire Council – 'Beach Safety: Innovation and Collaboration in Bass Coast' **Opposite image:** MAVlab Innovation Case Study Library, Mount Alexander Shire – 'Community Infrastructure for Flood Recovery and Resilience'



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t  
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Community Hub  
Emergency Hub

Rural Transaction Centre Inc.

Campbell's Creek

## Overview

### “Social connection is not just a nice idea. It is the very foundation of thriving communities” – World Health Organisation, June 2025.

Social connection fuels cooperation, sparks innovation and unlocks opportunities that no individual or institution can achieve alone. Without genuine connection, the complex challenges we face today, whether in public health, economic growth, or social stability, remain unsolvable.

Improved social cohesion and safer more engaged communities will also arise if there is more in-person connection which values cooperation, provides a sense of belonging, and generates respect for others and a shared understanding that encompasses differences.

Communities where people feel **safe, healthy, economically secure and connected** experience:

- higher wellbeing,
- less distress, and
- dramatically lower suicide rates.

These are not mere aspirations; they are proven outcomes backed by compelling evidence.

MAV's report BELONGING MATTERS examines the challenges facing local communities, opportunities, and the pivotal role local governments play in fostering social connection for mental health and wellbeing.

“Make no mistake – connection is not just a nice idea. It is fundamental. It strengthens communities, fosters cooperation and creates opportunities. Without connection, we will not be successful in solving the problems facing us today – whether they are public health, economic growth or social stability”.

From loneliness to social connection: charting a path to healthier societies. World Health Organisation. June 2025<sup>1</sup>

**Opposite image:** MAVlab Innovation Case Study Library, Baw Baw Shire Council – ‘Shaping the Future of Noojee’

# Changing course for positive mental health and wellbeing

## Prevention is the key

Australians are grappling with rising psychological distress despite increased mental health investment by governments. Loneliness and social disconnection are escalating, posing serious threats to global health and our social fabric.

Many mental ill-health conditions are preventable. Investing in prevention is not only socially and morally responsible but also cost-effective, yielding significant savings for governments and society alike. Good health empowers individuals to engage fully in community life, education, and employment, which in turn strengthens social cohesion, belonging and collective resilience.

*“The Australian and Victorian Governments working in partnership with local government to deliver community-based preventive and public health programs will significantly improve population health outcomes, reduce long-term healthcare costs and relieve pressure on hospitals and emergency departments.*

*Investment in preventive health measures should be at least 5% of health budgets”.*

Resolution passed by representatives from all 79 Victorian councils at the MAV State Council, October 2025

Strong, connected neighbourhoods have the power to promote inclusion, protect against loneliness and foster wellbeing. Yet, there remain critical gaps between national and state policies and the untapped potential of local communities.

MAV's Report BELONGING MATTERS shows how investment in social connection can prevent loneliness and improve community resilience and social cohesion. Supported by two expert technical papers, it clarifies commonly used mental health terminology, presents communal solutions which have been proven to work and recommendations for new approaches to arresting mental ill-health in its tracks.

*“Despite billions spent on mental health, loneliness and disconnection are eroding our communities from the inside out. Let's work on preventing problems in the first place by working on being well together”.*

Cr Jennifer Anderson, President MAV



This report is a wake-up call: without coordinated, whole-of-government action focused on social connection, inclusion, and place-based community initiatives, mental health outcomes will continue to deteriorate, no matter how much governments spend.

# Changes which can be made now

## What can we collectively do to effect meaningful change?

By empowering councils to foster local connections, we can build healthier, more resilient communities, deepen individual and collective strength, and boost productivity across society. Investing in connected communities alongside physical infrastructure is essential to stem the loneliness epidemic and strengthen social cohesion.

A collaborative, whole-of-government focus on place-based social connection via local government could transform mental health outcomes for individuals and communities alike.

This model illustrates what we need to work on to achieve deep and lasting social connection.

Local connectedness, inclusivity and cohesiveness all need to be present and work well for positive individual and community wellbeing. If there are many individuals experiencing social isolation or loneliness, then it's unlikely the broader community will have high levels of inclusion, cohesion, and social capital.

*"The time people spend together, the activities they engage in with one another, and the quality and diversity of their relationships play an important role in determining overall health, happiness and wellbeing... however Australians have become less trusting of others and less connected with their neighbourhoods."*

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare<sup>2</sup>

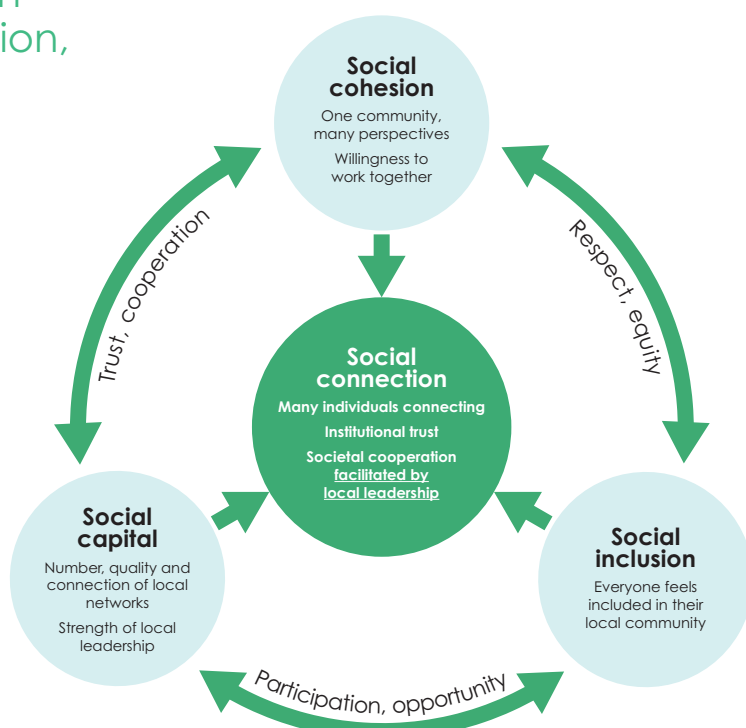
*"Social cohesion, the glue that binds communities, is under pressure amid rising distrust, financial stress, and social fragmentation".*

Scanlon Research Institute Index of Social Cohesion<sup>3</sup>

*"Local councils are also directly affected by the state of social cohesion. When social cohesion is low, there is increased pressure on local services, greater social tensions and reduced trust within the community... social fragmentation can expose or deepen vulnerabilities and social fault lines".*

Australian Health Policy Collaboration, Victoria University

## Essential ingredients for social connection:



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## Context

The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System in 2021 highlighted the critical role communities play in preventing mental ill-health. Recommendation 15 specified the Victorian Government establish and recurrent resource community collectives in each local government area.

The Victorian Government's vision is to transform Victoria's mental health system so Victorians living with mental ill-health, and their families and carers are supported to live full and contributing lives. The [Victorian Health and Wellbeing Plan 2023–2027](#) and the [Victorian Wellbeing Strategy 2025–2035](#) outline key priority actions being delivered to protect and promote health and wellbeing in Victoria. A Social Inclusion Action Group program was also initiated.

In recognition of the enormous task in meeting unmet demand for mental health services, the Victorian Government introduced a Mental Health and Wellbeing Levy in 2022 to dedicate expenditure on mental health, with expenditures now over \$3 billion per year.

Strengthening protective wellbeing has also been recognised as a key enabler in the [National Suicide Prevention Strategy 2025–2035](#), with communities in which people feel safe, healthy, economically secure and connected to others being associated with higher levels of wellbeing, lower levels of distress and lower suicide rates. The Australian Productivity Commission has recently released its final report reviewing the [National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement](#).

All Victorian councils play a role in supporting their communities to thrive and flourish, including through their four-yearly Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans.

Beyond Australia, the World Health Organisation's landmark report [From Loneliness to Social Connection – Charting a path to healthier societies](#) has identified the urgent need for action to retain social connection for the health, strength and resilience of individuals and societies.<sup>1</sup>

The Australian and Victorian Governments are currently spending over \$3.4 billion each year on mental ill-health. A recent Australian Productivity Commission report cites that the effects of mental ill-health and suicide cost Australia over \$200 billion a year through lost productivity and reduced life expectancy.<sup>4</sup>

Loneliness has been estimated to cost the Australian economy around \$2.7 billion annually, equivalent to an annual cost of \$1,565 for each person who becomes lonely. This cost reflects the impact of loneliness on physical and mental health and subsequent service use, productivity, and the overall economy.<sup>5,6</sup>

# Issues requiring attention



## Key insights

**The world is changing at an unprecedented pace, reshaping how we connect and interact. These global forces ripple through local communities, profoundly impacting mental health.**

- Continued urbanisation and population growth, with Victoria's current population of 6.8 million people expected to reach 10.3 million by 2051<sup>7</sup>
- Rising proportion of people over 65 years to 2 million, almost double current numbers<sup>7,8</sup>
- Increasing average annual temperatures, with more intense and frequent heatwaves, and decreased average annual rainfall but more intense storms are occurring<sup>9</sup>

Local communities and their governments are navigating a complex landscape shaped by multiple, simultaneous global transformations, including:

- New extremes of climate volatility
- Demographic shifts, peaks and cliffs
- Digital landscape proliferating
- Social instability and fragmentation
- Infrastructure resilience and risk

Together, these forces intensify pressures on mental health and wellbeing at the local level, demanding adaptive, place-based responses that are as dynamic as the challenges themselves.

**Despite significant government spending, mental ill-health and demand for services continue to rise, underscoring the urgent need for new approaches.**

- 1 in 5 Victorians are experiencing mental illness annually<sup>10</sup>
- More than 3,000 Australians die by suicide each year<sup>11</sup>
- Lifeline Australia recorded its busiest year in 2024, with 1.36 million contacts<sup>12</sup>
- \$3.4 billion is being spent each year on mental ill-health in Victoria<sup>13</sup>

Mental health challenges are escalating. Across Australia, mental wellbeing has declined over the past decade, with distress fuelled by factors like cost of living, social isolation, and housing insecurity.

Suicide remains a leading cause of death, Young people are particularly vulnerable, with a significant proportion experiencing suicidal ideation.

Despite increased government investment, mental health treatment services are struggling to meet demand, leaving many without necessary support.



**Rapid technological advances are redefining how people live, work, and connect.**

- Mis- and dis-information have been identified as the top global risks by the World Economic Forum<sup>14</sup>
- Doubling in bills now paid online<sup>15</sup>
- Over a third of young people have constant contact with friends online<sup>16</sup>

Rapid technological change is reshaping social interaction.

While digital tools offer new ways to connect, they can also contribute to misinformation, polarisation, and reduced in-person engagement.

The World Health Organisation has identified social disconnection as a serious threat to global health, contributing to increased risks of disease, early death, and poorer mental health, along with significant social and economic costs.<sup>1</sup>

Young people in particular report high levels of online contact but also face challenges with problematic social media use, impacting mental health.

**Loneliness, social isolation, and exclusion are on the rise, fuelling psychological distress, deteriorating physical health, and escalating societal costs.**

- 23.3% of adults in Victoria experience loneliness, with people with severe loneliness 4.6 times likely to have depression, and 4.1 times more likely to have social anxiety<sup>6</sup>
- Lone person households are expected to increase to 27.6% of the Victorian population by 2051<sup>7</sup>

Loneliness and social isolation have been found to be a contributing factor to mental ill-health. The recent inquiry into loneliness by the NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues found that loneliness is not the same as being alone.

*"An individual can spend time alone and not feel lonely or isolated from others; equally, an individual can be surrounded by familiar people, but still feel lonely"*<sup>17</sup>

An advisory from the United States Surgeon General in 2023 found that lonely people have a 26% increased risk of mortality ... with the health impacts like smoking 15 cigarettes per day and greater than the impact of obesity and physical inactivity.<sup>18</sup>

**Local government stands uniquely positioned to deliver the community infrastructure and services that nurture social connection and inclusion.**

- Councils spend \$3.68 billion annually on community infrastructure and services<sup>19</sup>
- Asset renewal and infrastructure to meet growing population needs are key issues needing to be addressed to maintain local liveability

Community initiatives addressing social connection are scattered across multiple government departments, often lacking coordination and overlooking local government's critical role.

Government expenditure on mental health has also surged, yet outcomes have not improved proportionally.

This disconnect highlights the need for more effective, coordinated approaches.

*"...every lost club, every closed hall, every bulldozed gathering space is another crack in our social infrastructure. This cost isn't just measured in dollars; it's measured in the pain of loneliness, disconnection and exclusion in the people left behind when community vanishes. Once these places are gone, where do people go?"*<sup>20</sup>

# Opportunity to change – think local!

## Communal place-based solutions need more focus

Evidence collated in the MAV's Belonging Matters report highlights the important role communal interventions can play in promoting health and wellbeing, at much reduced cost to health service systems.

*“Local, place-based infrastructure and social connections for wellbeing is there – deep and wide community networks facilitated by councils, local services and facilities such as public libraries, recreation centres, parks and community centres.*

*But if people aren't linked to these through programs that foster participation, interaction and engagement, the community can't experience the full benefits of social connection, belonging, and collective resilience”.*

MAV President, Cr Jennifer Anderson

## Research evidence on communal-level actions

Response spectrum		Promote wellbeing	Prevent mental ill-health	Early detection	Low intensity support	High intensity support
Type of Intervention	Population	Health promotion and public information Reducing stigma for people with mental ill-health		Medicare system Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme	Service promotion and availability	Service availability
	Communal	Neighbourhood design interventions Leverage green and blue spaces (e.g. parks, woodland, rivers, lakes) Alternative use of spaces Community development interventions Community hubs		Public information and awareness raising campaigns, word-of-mouth	Support for carers from families and friends	Support for carers from families and friends
	Individual	Social network and contact Physical/exercise Leisure/skill development	Education Social skills training Social support Computer/internet/digital	Local medical and support services	Psychological/therapy Social prescribing trials to attend community activities	Hospitalisation
Cost		●	●	●	●	●

Delivered by local government

Legend for cost per capita: Green = low; Orange = medium; Red = high.

# Work with local government

## Alignment of government programs and interventions

Many departments across national and state governments provide individual funding programs to local communities. So much more could be achieved if these many and varied funding programs could be better prioritised for their health and wellbeing impacts.

## Collective focus could reduce harmful loneliness

Loneliness and social isolation are major public health challenges linked to mental ill-health, early death, and increased healthcare costs.

In Victoria, nearly a quarter of adults experience loneliness, with severe loneliness dramatically increasing risks of depression and social anxiety.

Place-based interventions targeting loneliness could yield substantial savings in health expenditures and improve quality of life.

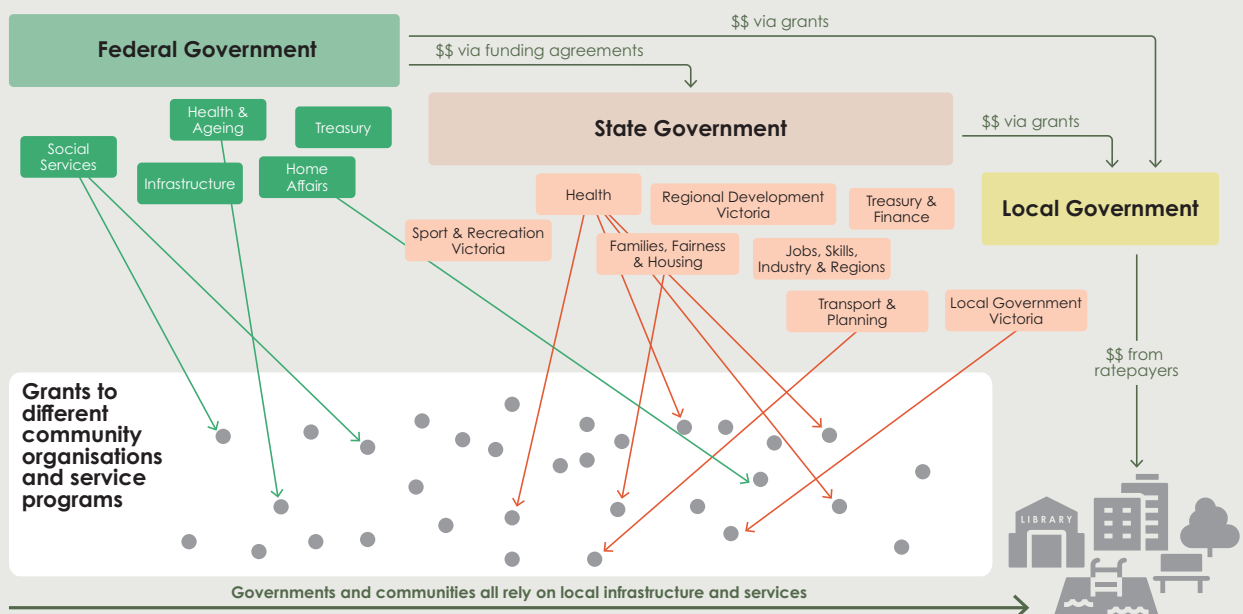
## Building wellbeing together

Social cohesion in Australia is at a historic low, reflecting broader societal pessimism, declining trust, and rising financial stress.

Investing in community-building initiatives that promote inclusion and cohesion offers a more positive, sustainable path to social cohesion.

Socially cohesive societies experience less discrimination and stigma, fostering fairer workplaces and fuller participation.

## Opportunity to improve multiple government funding streams



# About local government

Victorian councils are deeply invested in creating strong, healthy and connected communities.

They manage and maintain an extensive network of public spaces and facilities – parks, libraries, recreation centres, community halls, playgrounds and sporting grounds – which serve as the social infrastructure of every day life. This is not just bricks and mortar – it is significant local investment in belonging, in keeping people connected and in the quiet, everyday acts of connection that sustain mental health and wellbeing.



**In 2023–2024, \$3.68 billion was spent collectively by Victorian councils in recurrent expenditures on community infrastructure and services:**

Activity	\$ annually
<b>Recreation and culture:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Sports grounds and facilities</li> <li>– Parks and reserves</li> <li>– Waterways, lakes and beaches</li> <li>– Art galleries</li> <li>– Museums and cultural heritage</li> <li>– Performing arts centres</li> <li>– Libraries</li> <li>– Public centres and halls</li> </ul>	<b>\$2.36 billion</b>
<b>Family and community services</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Families and children</li> <li>– Community health</li> <li>– Education</li> <li>– Community housing</li> </ul>	<b>\$0.95 billion</b>
<b>Aged and disability services</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Community care services</li> <li>– Facilities</li> </ul>	<b>\$0.36 billion</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$3.68 billion</b>

Source: [Council expenditure and revenue data 2023–24, Victorian Local Government Grants Commission<sup>19</sup>](#)

“The future of wellbeing is local. Councils are not the periphery of the system, they are its beating heart”.

Dr Stephen Carbone, mental health clinician and founder of Prevention United

**This page image:** MAVlab Innovation Library Case Study Library, Darebin City Council – Northcote Aquatic and Recreation Centre  
**Opposite image:** MAVlab Innovation Case Study Library, Yarra Ranges Shire Council – ‘Our Country, Our Way – Embedding Indigenous Perspectives in Land and Emergency Management’

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## Recommendations

### Time for place-based action via local government

Preventing rising mental ill-health demands bold, coordinated action across all levels of government, with a shared focus on prevention through social connection at the local level.

By harnessing the unique strengths of local governments and communities and aligning with Victorian and Australian Government policy frameworks—we can build resilient, inclusive, and thriving societies.

This report calls for a whole-of-government commitment to place-based strategies that prioritise connection, inclusion, and wellbeing. These strategies must be embedded within national and state mental health reform agendas, with a clear line of sight to accountability and measurable impact of publicly funded investments in population wellbeing.

In Victoria, implementation of the recommendations from the 2021 Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System is essential to ensure coherence, sustainability, and equity of outcomes.

Alignment with Australia-wide initiatives such as the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement, and reforms being undertaken will also help.

Together, we can transform mental health outcomes and create healthier futures for all Victorians. And the time to act is now.



# Recommendations



Social investment	Whole-of-government delivery, with local government	Infrastructure investment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <b>Launch a statewide ‘Community Cohesion Action Fund’</b> coordinated by the MAV, using local assets to rebuild local community connections for safer, more engaged and socially cohesive communities.</li> <li>– <b>Extend the Victorian Government’s 10 Social Inclusion Action Groups</b> to support more communities in building social connection infrastructure.</li> <li>– <b>“Local Issues, Local Solutions” Active Local Democracy Fund</b> in cooperation with councils to design and pilot programs that promote active democracy and combat disinformation at the community and neighbourhood level.</li> <li>– <b>Explore local social enterprise collaboration</b> opportunities in partnership with local government to boost local resilience.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <b>Connect departments across all levels of government</b> to deliver actions in the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement and reforms from the Victorian Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health system.</li> <li>– <b>Investigate improved efficiencies and potential health cost savings to enhance social connection</b>, including social prescribing being available through the medical referral system.</li> <li>– <b>Include local government-specific initiatives in the National Stigma and Discrimination Reduction Strategy</b> to reduce impacts on people with lived and living experience of mental ill health and suicide.</li> <li>– <b>Adequately support and fund service providers</b> demonstrating effectiveness, particularly those working with people in serious need of help.</li> <li>– <b>Address service gaps for responding to people experiencing acute mental health episodes in public places</b>, particularly the gap in culturally appropriate supports.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <b>Fund the Gap Community Infrastructure Fund</b> over three years until a statewide infrastructure contribution scheme is in place in 2027–28 to ensure councils can continue providing essential enabling infrastructure, including:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activity transport, walking and bike-riding trails</li> <li>• Maintain, upgrade and build new public pools and aquatic/leisure centres</li> <li>• Public library infrastructure.</li> </ul> </li> <li>– <b>Fast-track and prioritise public transport and active transport links</b> to unlock economic growth and housing supply in under-served areas.</li> </ul>

**Together, we can transform mental health outcomes and create healthier futures for all Victorians. And the time to act is now.**

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## Further information

Contact the MAV at [inquiries@mav.asn.au](mailto:inquiries@mav.asn.au) for a link to MAV's full report *Belonging Matters*.

## Content warning

People with lived experience of mental ill-health are especially acknowledged, along with their families and friends who support them. Please note there are references to suicide in this report. If you require help as a result of reading this report, please contact Lifeline Australia on 13 11 14 or chat online – [lifeline.org.au](http://lifeline.org.au)