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Author:
Gendera, Sandra; Fisher, Karen R; Robinson, Sally; Badu, Eric; Kremer, Ricky

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SPRC UNSW Social Policy Research Centre

Community for Everyone

Final Evaluation Report

October 2026

Prepared for:
Side By Side Advocacy and Hunter Circles

Prepared by:
Sandra Gendera, Karen R Fisher, Sally Robinson, Eric Badu, Ricky Kremer

Flinders UNIVERSITY
College of Nursing & Health Sciences

UNSW SYDNEY

Acknowledgement of country
We value the cultures, knowledge and practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and how this contributes to quality research. We are committed to not perpetuating harms that have been caused by research on and about Indigenous Peoples. We embrace and honour Indigenous knowledges and continue to learn from Indigenous Peoples where we work.

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Research Team
UNSW: Karen R Fisher, Sandra Gendera, Eric Badu, Ricky Kremer
Flinders University: Sally Robinson

For further information karen.fisher@unsw.edu.au

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Glossary

Community for Everyone	2-year funded Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) grant and project delivered by Hunter Circles and Side By Side Advocacy
Pioneer connector	Social connectors who joined before the project
Profoundly socially isolated	People who lived in segregated settings, including large institutions, usually with limited or no contact with family or social connections except with other people with intellectual disability and paid support. Mainly paid support relationships rather than freely given
Social connector	Volunteers who give their time to build connections and friendship with one or more person with intellectual disability

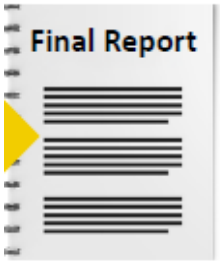
Easy read summary

Community for Everyone

Final Report



About this report



This is the final report for Community for Everyone.



Community for Everyone is a project for people with intellectual disability who may feel lonely.



The project helps people with disability to connect with other people in the community.



The report says what was good about the project and what we learned.

About Community for Everyone



The project is for people with intellectual disability.



The project is in NSW.



The project **helps people** to:

- **connect** to people who have similar **interests**



- be **part of community** life



- feel like they **belong**.

How we found out what people thought

	People with intellectual disability helped plan the project. They helped make decisions. Working together like this is called **co-design**.
	We collected information about Community for Everyone.
	We listened to people who were in the project.
	Some people used words to tell us their stories.
	Some people did not use words to communicate. They showed us what was important in other ways.

What worked well in Community for Everyone



The project paid Peer Leaders to work on the project. Peer Leaders are people with intellectual disability.



Peer Leaders helped to make decisions and run the project.



People found out about the project in many ways.

	The project connected people with intellectual disability and local community members to get to know each other.
	They did interesting things together in the community.
	People with disability felt welcome in the community. Some people belonged to a group. **Belonging** was when other people in a group • remembered their name • remembered what they liked and did not like • invited them to things outside the group

Here are some things that the project found out	
	It helps to meet with people with disability where they already spend their time.
	It takes time to get to know the person and their interests.
	It is good to connect people who have similar interests and live nearby.
	It helps to find welcoming community groups that interest the person.

	It is important to help the person make friends with people in the group.
	Build trust and relationships with providers who know the person well. These people can help make introductions. They can help the person feel comfortable.
 	Make sure there is a skilled person in a paid role to support the people with and without disability in their relationship. They might **want support** when they: • start to get to know each other • want to change something • need new connections

For more information about Community for Everyone	
	You can learn more about the project: www.unsw.edu.au/research/sprc/research/accessible-reports
	You can **click these links** to find out more: https://sidebysideadvocacy.org.au/ https://www.huntercircles.org/community/

Summary

Hunter Circles and Side By Side Advocacy were funded by the Department of Social Services with an Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) grant to deliver the Community for Everyone project in two areas of New South Wales (NSW). They commissioned UNSW Sydney and Flinders University to evaluate the project using a developmental action research approach. This evaluation report details the 2 years of the project. It focuses on the impact and outcomes from the project, and how the project engaged with people with intellectual disability, social connectors, their local communities and disability service providers.

These relationships were transformative for people who have had very few opportunities for the kinds of connections that most people take for granted. This type of community-building is consistent with policy expectations in current and forthcoming policy (ADS, NDIS), where we anticipate people with intellectual disability take their place in local communities. This project showed this goal requires purposeful, careful, skilled support. It needs skilled coordination and facilitation to bring to life the community willingness. These social connector relationships would not happen or be sustained without the paid support to facilitate them.

Elements of the approach

- Engaging with people with intellectual disability through support providers at the places where people live and spend their days
- Slow and intentional getting to know the person to understand their interests and preferences for social inclusion, including by spending time in the person's home, learning about things that matter to them, and by speaking with people who know the person well
- Engaging community members, social connectors, allies, friends and family of people with intellectual disability to build readiness for connection
- Connecting a person with social connectors (unpaid community member/s) who share similar interests and live close by
- Providing person-centred decision support and intentional, personalised planning with the person to try novel community experiences that match their interests
- Building capacity of the person and social connectors to develop relationships and grow the conditions for inclusion in the person's preferred community contexts (e.g. expand opportunities for connections with other community members)

- Gradually strengthening a person's community belonging through 'becoming known' by others; by regularly attending the same places, times and community groups, so the person can develop deeper relationships and form new connections
- Working together to resolve challenges and manage change
- Developing and sustaining a collaborative approach and buy-in with providers who know the person
- The approach changed over time, as the project team and social connectors learned more about each person, new opportunities emerged. The Community for Everyone team continued to ask, 'What more is possible?' as interpersonal connections between the person and social connectors developed.

Outcomes

Participants with intellectual disability had improved opportunities for choices about social experiences, social relationships, community inclusion and belonging, growth and confidence and safeguarding decisions.

Social connectors benefited from connections and friendships with people with intellectual disability; learning and personal growth; awareness of the importance of networks and relationships in the lives of people with intellectual disability; and a shared community and purpose.

Local communities and members grew to understand the benefits from inclusion and contributions from diverse members, especially those with little to no previous interactions with people with intellectual disability.

Where reconnecting with family and friends was possible with sufficient time and resources, it had profound social impact for the person and family.

Some disability services embraced the approach of personalised community inclusion opportunities when they saw the outcomes in the project, such as people with disability having informal relationships and friendships in their lives, being 'known' and 'missed' by others (eg., when the person did not attend as expected).

Lessons for similar projects

Engagement in the project

Engagement with people with intellectual disability was through the organisations and places where people were likely to be socially isolated. This required gaining provider

and decision makers' trust through repeated persistent contact, then meeting the person many times to gain their informed consent or assent to participate.

Engagement with service providers where people lived or worked built from existing contacts or established new contacts. Both approaches took time to build trust, often over many months, through consistent, relational and respectful engagement to demonstrate the potential of the approach.

Engagement with social connectors was through wide promotion in the local community, followed by personal discussions. Another approach was personalised engagement by attending places with the person to strengthen possible connections. The expectations of social connectors evolved to be flexible about time, commitment and training to respond to social connectors' capacity and motivations.

Connecting and sustaining relationships

Getting to know the person required prolonged deep listening, using ways to support their expression and choice and identifying their existing connections, from which to make personalised iterative plans for inclusion.

Connecting between the person and social connector required planning for compatibility, informed choices, and building familiarity and trust by spending regular times together in their preferred places.

Building the relationship and community inclusion required conditions that were respectful and personalised, consistent and predictable to everyone involved, built shared interests and were able to rely on support from the project team.

Sustaining these connections required actively building the conditions for inclusion that would extend the person's connections and network. These conditions also supported the social connector's commitment. The project team supported any changes in these connections.

Sustaining collaboration with providers was critical to the success of the approach and time consuming. It required sustained communication and problem solving to demonstrate the benefits of the approach. The project team found allies to maintain the commitment.

Capacity building processes

Capacity building support to people with intellectual disability began with support to decide whether to engage in the project. As the social connections and community inclusion progressed, the project team handed most of the capacity building to the social connector.

Capacity building with the social connectors and community members was relational and became more flexible as the project progressed. Options included training sessions, workshops, individual support and group meetings.

Peer leaders and pioneer social connectors shared their experience through the capacity building and led decisions about the project. The project advisory group offered expert advice, especially to overcome challenges to engagement and sustainability.

1. Introduction to Community for Everyone

Hunter Circles and Side By Side Advocacy were funded by the Department of Social Services with an Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) grant to deliver the Community for Everyone project in Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, Ryde and Parramatta New South Wales (NSW). They commissioned UNSW Sydney and Flinders University to evaluate the project, using a developmental action research approach. The evaluation methods are included in Appendix B and C.

This final evaluation report details the first two years of the project. The analysis focuses on the impact and outcomes from Community for Everyone with profoundly socially isolated people with intellectual disability, social connectors, local communities and disability service providers. The sections of the report are about outcomes from the project, process of engagement, connecting and sustaining relationships, building capacity and lessons for future similar projects.

All names in this report are aliases to protect privacy. Quotes are from participants if they are available. The stories of people who do not communicate with words are described by other people.

1.1 About Community for Everyone

Community for Everyone was a 2-year project (June 2024 to June 2026), designed to form relationships between 20 profoundly isolated people with intellectual disability in their local communities. The project aimed to foster meaningful connections, genuine community inclusion and increased interpersonal connections by forming relationships between people with disability and social connectors. The project aim was that social connectors and the project team would develop conditions for inclusion in the person's social contexts and preferred community groups.

1.1.1 Project objectives

The approach taken was to

- get to know the socially isolated person with intellectual disability to understand their interests and preferences for social inclusion
- develop decision support and intentional planning with the person to try novel community experiences

- connect the person with a social connector who shared similar interests and lived close by
- support social connectors to develop the relationship and to grow the conditions for inclusion in the person's preferred community contexts (e.g. opportunities for connections with other community members)
- develop a collaborative approach with providers who know the person
- strengthen community belonging of the person through becoming 'known' by others; regularly attending the same places, times and community activities, so the person has deeper relationships and formed new, diverse connections.

The objective of Community for Everyone was to address significant social isolation of people with intellectual disability by facilitating their inclusive participation. The project aimed to generate evidence about how social relationships, networks and community belonging could be achieved through connecting the person and the social connector, supporting community development within the person's preferred communities and facilitating cultural change in organisations and communities that know the person. Details of the Community for Everyone approach, the project logic and intended outcomes are in Appendix C.

> We believe inclusion is everyone's business; we want to activate everyone. Our purpose is to bring in freely given relationships into the lives of people with intellectual disability. (Project staff)

Community for Everyone applied several interconnected processes to achieve its project objectives. The Project Logic in Appendix C lays out the project activities and how they achieve the outcomes and impacts. Sections 3 to 5 details the engagement processes, connecting and sustaining relationships and capacity building in Community for Everyone.

The project and evaluation contributed to the evidence base on strategies to broaden opportunities for inclusion and participation for people with complex support needs who have limited existing social networks.

1.1.2 Context of institutionalisation and profound social isolation

The focus of the project was to address the profound social isolation of people who previously lived in institutions, often for all or most of their lives. This history meant people were often isolated from any family, friends and other unpaid relationships outside the institution during childhood and adulthood. Some people with complex

support and communication needs did not receive support to form friendships within the institution and the segregated setting damaged family relationships (Steele et al., 2023).

When they left the institutions, many people moved to smaller congregate care in group homes. In these settings and with their previous history, they continued to have few or no opportunities for relationships, social connections and inclusion outside the paid support (Gooding et al., 2017).

Research about meaningful relationships, belonging and inclusion of people leaving institutional care emphasises the need for a person-centred approach to develop pathways to inclusion (Gur & Bina, 2022; Robinson & Idle, 2023), in combination with developing the community conditions where a person is respected and their contribution is appreciated and reciprocated (Amado, 2014; Clifford Simplican et al., 2015). The Community for Everyone project aimed to apply this evidence to learn how to form meaningful connections with people most socially isolated due to this exclusionary history.

1.1.3 Social inclusion and people with intellectual disability

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognises the right of people with disability and intellectual disability to be fully included in community life, with equal opportunities for participation and barriers to inclusion removed (UN, 2006). Despite this, people with intellectual disability continue to experience high levels of social isolation and loneliness. Research suggests that over 40% of people with intellectual disability may experience social isolation (Llorens-Roman et al., 2026), with older people and people with greater support needs at particular risk of social isolation (McCarron et al., 2011; McCarron et al., 2023).

Social isolation and loneliness are influenced by interacting factors from structures, social situation and the person (Llorens-Roman et al., 2026). These include discriminatory attitudes, structural barriers, difference in communication, and limited opportunities to develop relationships (Gilmore & Cuskelly, 2014; Robinson & Idle, 2023). Disability services can also influence opportunities for social connection. Limited resources and funding, together with practices that do not adequately acknowledge the importance of relationships, can restrict opportunities for meaningful connection between people with intellectual disability and their local communities (Reeves, McConnell & Phelan, 2025).

The legacy of institutionalisation and segregation is also significant. Research following people with intellectual disability who moved from institutional to community settings

found that five years after relocation most people had not been supported to develop new relationships, family connections had reduced, and 62% of people had no-one other than service providers who knew them well (Bigby, 2008). This demonstrates that living in a community setting does not necessarily result in meaningful relationships or a sense of belonging.

Social isolation and loneliness have significant consequences for health, wellbeing, safety and quality of life. Social isolation can increase vulnerability to abuse, neglect and exploitation where people do not have a network of people who know them well, can identify concerns or advocate for them (NASEM, 2020; Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2023).

Social isolation and loneliness are also associated with poorer health outcomes, including increased risk of depression and anxiety, physical inactivity, impaired sleep, cardiovascular disease and cognitive decline (AIHW, 2026; NASEM, 2020; WHO, 2025; Sherman et al., 2024). Research also indicates that strong social relationships are associated with better physical and psychological health. Social disconnection is associated with increased risk of premature mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; 2015). For people with intellectual disability, these health impacts are particularly important given existing health inequalities experienced by this population.

Social inclusion involves more than physical presence in community settings or attending activities. People with intellectual disability say having purpose and feeling valued and respected as important to avoiding loneliness and experiencing belonging and inclusion (Robinson & Idle, 2023). Human relationships contribute to belonging, identity, purpose and life satisfaction (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Support workers, families and others can either facilitate or create barriers to developing these relationships (Bigby, 2008; Robinson & Idle, 2023).

Attempts to address social isolation have included leisure and social groups, volunteers and mentors. However, evidence about their effectiveness in expanding social networks and reducing isolation has been mixed (Llorens-Roman et al., 2026). This suggests that increasing participation or attendance does not necessarily result in meaningful, reciprocal or lasting relationships.

Informal relationships are also important to supported decision-making. Diversity, dignity, equity and best practice: A framework for supported decision-making (Bigby et al., 2023), commissioned by the Disability Royal Commission, identified limited evidence about how social connections can be developed for people with intellectual disability who do not have strong family or other informal relationships. Recommendations called for building social connections for socially isolated people

with intellectual disability to be a priority investment in supported decision-making initiatives, including research and demonstration programs to build and evaluate lasting and robust social networks (Recommendations 10.1 and 10.2).

The need for evidence is urgent about how meaningful relationships can be developed and sustained for people with intellectual disability who have few or no existing informal relationships. This includes people with communication and support needs and people whose opportunities to develop relationships have been restricted by long histories of institutionalisation, segregation and social exclusion.

Community for Everyone contributed to this evidence by examining the outcomes of intentional social connection and the practices and conditions required for meaningful relationships and community belonging to develop and be sustained. The project was an opportunity to examine not only whether social connection can be increased. It also demonstrated how relationships develop, what supports them to become meaningful and sustainable, and what organisational and community conditions support people with intellectual disability to experience genuine belonging and inclusion.

1.2 Project structure

1.2.1 Project organisations

Community for Everyone was implemented by two not for profit community organisations (Side By Side Advocacy and Hunter Circles) in NSW (Newcastle and the Lake Macquarie area and in Parramatta and Ryde, Sydney). This project was the first time the two organisations and lived experience teams worked together, drawing on combined expertise and knowledge of

- Lived experience project co-leadership, including in project co-design, delivery and dissemination
- Community development principles to grow conditions for connection and social inclusion for people with intellectual disability in ordinary community groups and contexts.

The intention of Community for Everyone was to build on existing evidence to harness learnings from the project about developing genuine social inclusion and belonging for people with intellectual disability to broaden the social impact and policy reach of the project.

The two organisations (Hunter Circles, 2026; Side By Side Advocacy, 2026) are grounded in the deinstitutionalisation movement with a commitment to social justice,

informed by international research and practices that advocate for the rights and genuine community inclusion of people with intellectual disability. The organisations' focus in this project is with people with intellectual disability who lived or still live in segregated settings such as group homes.

Side By Side Advocacy is an advocacy organisation that specialises in advocacy for people with intellectual disability. With over 30 years' experience, working alongside people with intellectual disability, Side By Side Advocacy is well known to disability service providers (group homes, day programs) and other community organisations. They are based in a large metropolitan area, receive most of their funding from the federal government and have an established citizen advocacy program – an approach to engaging volunteers to match with people with intellectual disability who are profoundly isolated to address fundamental unmet needs for instrumental support and relationship, including social isolation. Some of these advocacy relationships have continued for decades. In an attempt to reach people who may not be aware of advocacy or who face barriers seeking assistance, their advocacy includes in-reach to people with intellectual disability living in highly marginalised circumstances, including closed settings (Side By Side Advocacy, 2026).

Hunter Circles, a grassroots organisation based in Newcastle, was established in 2021 by a group of local people, including people with disability and their allies. Prior to receiving project funding, the organisation was largely volunteer-led, developing community-led approaches to belonging for people with intellectual disability experiencing profound social isolation. Its practice includes community development and facilitating Circles of Support. Two relationships (including Adam and Alfred's story) were the foundational model for the social connector role in the Community for Everyone project. These relationships demonstrated how repeated, consistent, trust-based engagement with people with intellectual disability, service providers (group homes), and other decision makers (Guardians and Person's Responsible) achieved greater social inclusion for profoundly isolated people with intellectual disability, marginalised due to leaving large institutions, some of which closed in the Hunter Region in the last 10 years.

1.2.2 Project staff and governance

Leaders with lived expertise. Community for Everyone employed four peer leaders with intellectual disability. The four members were part of the project leadership team and involved in governance planning and other decisions. Peer leaders co-designed and co-delivered workshops to social connectors drawing on their lived experience and expertise, co-presented to a wide range of audiences, including local community groups and organisations, academia, policy makers and the general public.

Leadership team. Each location had two paid peer leaders and a project lead without intellectual disability, who worked the equivalent of 4 days per week.

Project advisory group. The Project Advisory Group (PAG) was a shared activity facilitated by both organisations. The PAG had 11 members who met quarterly to provide guidance and direction to the project. Members included the teams at Hunter Circles and Side By Side Advocacy, two board members of each organisation, academic subject matter experts and other members as relevant (e.g. service provider representatives).

1.2.3 Project stakeholders

The project engaged with isolated people with intellectual disability through in-reach and out-reach initiatives in two NSW communities: social connectors (unpaid community members without intellectual disability); people who enquired about the project received information and/or participated in training and capacity building activities and events, some of whom became social connectors; local community members who were part of the person's preferred community groups, family members and friends as collaborators; and disability service providers where the person lived or received other support services (Table 1).

Table 1. Stakeholder groups

Stakeholder group / project engagement	Number
Direct project involvement	
People with intellectual disability participating in CFE	20
Social Connectors[1]	21
Project Peer Leaders	4
Other paid project staff (all part time)	7
Project Advisory Group members (excluding staff)	5

Stakeholder group / project engagement	Number
Social Connector engagement and capacity building	
Potential Social Connectors who received individual engagement and follow-up but did not take up the role[2]	78
Other people who participated in CFE training and capacity building[3]	415
Circle of Support members[4]	7
Disability service engagement	
Disability service provider organisations approached where engagement with CFE did not proceed	3
Disability service provider organisations approached supporting people who participated in CFE [5]	11
Community engagement	
Community groups and organisations engaged through participants' interests and opportunities for connection	28
Broader project reach	
People reached through conferences and external events [6]	Estimated 2,000+

Notes:

[1] Two Social Connectors subsequently left/disengaged from the 2-year project.

[2] Includes people who received personalised engagement about becoming a Social Connector but did not ultimately take up the role. This could include individual conversations, meetings, discussion of interests and availability, follow-up and exploration of potential connections.

[3] Excludes people already counted as Social Connectors where possible. Run by SBSA or Hunter Circles.

[4] Includes unpaid community members involved in Circles developed or strengthened through CFE. Social Connectors who were also Circle members should not be counted twice when calculating the total number of individual people engaged.

[5] The level and nature of engagement with CFE varied across disability service provider organisations. Some collaborated extensively with the project over time, while others had more limited involvement related to supporting an individual participant's engagement.

[6] Conference figures represent estimated audiences at external conferences and events at which the CFE project was presented.

Profoundly isolated people with intellectual disability were the focus of the project (participants). Most people formerly lived in segregated settings including large institutions. When they joined Community for Everyone, most people had limited or no contact with family and other unpaid relationships in their life. Some people had state decision makers (legal guardians or financial managers). Others had family members designated as a person responsible for decisions, and some people made their own decisions with support. Participants lived in group homes or social housing. They had access to paid NDIS support.

Social connectors were volunteer community members who freely gave their time to build connections and friendship with one or more people with intellectual disability. Social connectors and the person with intellectual disability shared common interests and backgrounds (e.g. local context, interests, cultural background). Some connectors shared their social networks, which added allies and new opportunities for interpersonal connections. The project team supported social connectors to develop the relationship with the person and to grow the conditions for inclusion in the person's preferred social and community contexts.

Key characteristics of social connectors included: a focus on social inclusion and rights, strong listening skills, attentive observer, patient and respectful engagement, curiosity and open-mindedness. Connectors were dedicated to enriching the person's life and their own lives through forming relationships with a person with intellectual disability, and with other peer connectors and the communities in the project. Social connectors committed their time and ideas to make the approach effective.

2. Outcomes from the project

Summary of outcomes

Participants with intellectual disability had improved opportunities for choices about social experiences, interpersonal connections, community inclusion and belonging, growth and confidence and safeguarding decisions.

Social connectors benefited from connections and friendships with people with intellectual disability; learning and personal growth; awareness of the importance of networks and relationships in the lives of people with intellectual disability; and a shared community and purpose.

Local communities and members grew to understand the benefits from inclusion and contributions from diverse members, especially those with little to no previous interactions with people with intellectual disability.

Where *reconnecting with family and friends* was possible with sufficient time and resources, it had profound social impact for the person and family.

Some *disability services* extended the approach of personalised community inclusion opportunities when they saw the outcomes in the project.

2.1 Outcomes for people with intellectual disability

Over two years, Community for Everyone engaged 20 profoundly isolated people with intellectual disability. Most people (16) were formerly not known to the project or the two community organisations. The project successfully connected most participants (17) with at least one social connector and other community members over time. When people were not yet connected, the project team supported their engagement in a community group to strengthen relations to bring more community members into the person's life.

Participants with and without social connectors were supported to identify and pursue their interests as a core strategy for building opportunities for inclusion and a sense of belonging. This was done by spending time with the person to understand their preferences, collaborating with service providers to identify how social connections could be strengthened (e.g. in a person's existing social contexts, like church, a hobby

or another person) and by matching people with social connectors who supported the conditions for inclusion in new community contexts (Section 3).

Outcomes for participants in the project included improved opportunities for choices about social experiences, interpersonal connections, community inclusion and belonging, growth and confidence and safeguarding decisions.

2.1.1 Opportunities for choices about social experiences

The connection process was to start from the person's perspective and interests (see Section 4.1). The project team and social connector took time, often over months, to get to know the person to understand their preferences for social connection. This slow, intentional and iterative process of deep listening, developing trust and supporting choice, meant people could express interests and wishes about their community participation through words, their bodies, actions and expressions, that often had not previously been heard.

Person centred and intentional planning meant the opportunities started from the person's interests, what they already enjoyed doing (knitting, singing, painting, walking), as well as seeking out new community activities to explore their potential interests. Murray's (Story 6) long time 'dream was to do gardening or volunteering' but barriers had prevented him from becoming involved with community in this way. When Murray started with Community for Everyone, Murray, the project team, a social connector and the service provider, together discussed his preferences for inclusion, laying out options and what each entailed. For 6 months the team worked to find a community group that was inclusive and met his interests. Eventually Murray started attending a local gardening group with the social connector.

The project used diverse and individualised approaches to communication, paying close attention to how each person communicated their preferences through their words, responses, expressions, actions and interactions. Accessible information, including video and Easy Read, was used to support understanding and participation The choices were about who they wanted to be connected with, what meaningful participation meant to them or changing their mind about an activity or relationship.

> The structure of people's life is changing as a consequence of the project … of doing things differently … recognising how institutions and buildings and assumptions were passed down. (Project team)

> [the project team] really spend time with [the person] … 'What are your goals?' … with Bettina (Story 9), she has been knitting by herself, in her room, for a long

> time … People have lots of skills, but they haven't had the opportunities to exercise them … We see [people in the project] they really flourish … People feel respected. (Service provider)

An example was supporting Benjamin's (Story 14) choices through photos. Benjamin solved puzzles or went bowling with peers. After discussing ideas with the team and the provider, Benjamin decided he wanted to try a social group activity like trivia. Benjamin had never been to a trivia night, but he enjoyed quizzes and socialising, which were used as a starting point. The project team showed Benjamin photos about trivia and the venue to support his decision to take part.

> [Community for Everyone] does really clever matching … like with Benjamin, going to the trivia group … He's really good at trivia he absolutely loves it. The activity opens up the potential of him … meeting people who share the same passion. It is something he can look forward to and be part of the community. (Service provider)

Benjamin found 'true community inclusion at the trivia night' (Project team). After a few months, his connections extended to at least three other group members who shared his passion. These new connections were with people who knew Benjamin, waited for him to attend and join, and sent text messages. The team noted, 'this is the first time Benjamin has found community belonging outside where he lives.' After the success of the fortnightly trivia, the project team became aware of Benjamin's interest to explore his sexual identity and find a place for spiritual connection. The team found a queer church group that Benjamin was about to visit (Story 14).

2.1.2 Social relationships

Relationship with the social connector

Most participants formed new or deepened existing interpersonal connections. Initial connections were with the social connector. A few people, such as Cornelia (Story 2), remained mostly centred on the relationship with the social connector, for reasons such as preferring to first grow their confidence to leave home more frequently.

Over time, the initial connection deepened for most people. As their communication and understanding improved and their interest in each other deepened, the social connector relationship became more durable and trusting.

> I think we both feel more comfortable with each other [after 1 year]. And there was an incident where there was a moment where we weren't … but now [that is resolved] we're even more comfortable with each other, because more trust has

> been established. (Social connector)

The main challenges to deepening relationships were differing expectations for the connection (e.g. amount of time with a connector); communication, e.g. how to make direct contact with participants without a phone or other device; and communication barriers from providers' staff turnover and shift rotations affecting planning (Section 4).

Relationships with other community members

Several of the relationships between the person and the social connector had 'ripple effects' – drawing in diverse new relationships and connections, including family members. By regularly attending same place, same time, with the same people, the participant and social connectors were recognised by other community members.

During the 2 years, most people's social connections extended to other community members in their preferred social contexts, such as Landcare, community gardening, music, knitting, church, and spiritual groups or trivia nights. In his Saturday music group, Robert (Story 4) found 'community inclusion, community membership' and extended his social connections.

Community members often began to take an interest in spending time with the person. Nari (Story 11), who had a Korean Australian background, joined her local cultural church group with her social connector, Nelly. Within a short time, Nari extended her social connections. Nelly and the CfE team encouraged the church community to invite Nari to help to prepare shared meals. After 2-3 months, church members regularly invited Nari and Nelly to join cultural events and casual social outings.

> Nari is invited to dine out with other church members at local restaurants … The congregation members go out of their way to find out when Nari is planning to visit next, to ensure they can be at church to greet and speak to her. (Community member)

Sometimes the social connectors' own social networks, as well as the people the person engaged with at the community groups, became part of the connections around the person (Daniel's Story 1; Section 2.1.5).

> We have set up a WhatsApp chat and community members from parkrun and the social connectors in Daniel's life use the chat to stay in touch with him and each other during the week. (Social connector)

2.1.3 Community inclusion and belonging

The outcome through the relationships with the social connectors and other community members was greater community inclusion and a sense of belonging (Gendera Sandra et al., 2026). These outcomes were personalised to the participants' preferences.

Personalised community inclusion

Community inclusion meant different things for each person. It could mean leaving home more frequently with confidence, pursuing current interests in a community context with other people, trying a new experience or re-establishing connections with friends and family.

Adam's (Story 8) community inclusion meant he could spend regular time with Alfred, the social connector, relaxing or doing social things they both enjoyed. They enjoyed walking together, listening to music and connecting with other people in Alfreds' social network. In the first year the two men mostly spent time building trust, familiarity and getting to know each other, staying closer to Adam's home. Adam's paid support staff initially expressed concerns about how the connection would work. Over time Alfred gained the provider's trust by consistently showing up, being respectful and intentional. They could then venture out further and spend time in other locations. The CfE team helped Adam reconnect with his family. A special occasion was when Adam and Alfred travelled together to celebrate his birthday with his entire family.

Bettina (Story 9) already enjoyed knitting at home. The relationship with Vera, a social connector, and supported by the CfE team, meant she could extend that interest into a community opportunity. Bettina joined a weekly knitting group at the local library. Bettina and Vera (and some weeks the CfE staff) attended the group to knit and socialise. Initially, Vera and the CfE team set the conditions for inclusion, such as remembering people's names and prompting opportunities to strengthen Bettina's relationships. After a few months of chatting and laughing with the women at the weekly knitting group, Bettina developed new friendships.

Belonging and being known

Many participants started developing a sense of belonging. Indicators that people felt a sense of belonging encompassed several aspects of care, respect and appreciation demonstrated to them from the community members. Examples were community members knowing the participant's name; acknowledging their presence, absence, situation or preferences; celebrating and remembering the participant's contributions

or a birthday; adjusting the community group's conditions so the person felt welcome and included (see Section 4.4).

Belonging in these ways was a significant outcome for several participants. For example, Bettina's social connector, Vera, observed,

> When we run into a member from the group on the street, the person will say, 'Oh hi Bettina, how are you?' and Bettina will return a friendly hello. That's nice to see that the connections Bettina is forming with the [knitting] group extend to outside the group. (Social connector)

> Bettina loves the knitting group … She relishes in the social aspect of the group … The other members remembered Bettina's birthday, they brought in a special gluten free cake for her. This was a significant moment for Bettina to be remembered in this way on her birthday, she could celebrate with the other women. (Provider)

Daniel's (Story 1) sense of belonging was strengthened through the ways his social connector developed opportunities from their shared interests in nature and motorbikes (see also Dina's Story 19). Daniel and the connectors attended parkrun together, where Daniel volunteered. Initially, Dina established a connection with Daniel, organised Saturday pick-up and supported Daniel to feel comfortable at the event or make introductions. Daniel attended parkrun nearly weekly for 1.5 years and was known by other runners by name. Daniel knew at least 6 people by their name and chatted when he meets them. Daniel's contribution was acknowledged in many ways: community members brought gifts, like magazines he collects; celebrated and remembered his birthday; and learned how to avoid inadvertently upsetting Daniel through the use of certain words. Dina, the project staff and provider said Daniel enjoyed being part of the group and he was missed by others when absent:

> Daniel's community belonging was clearly visible when he missed three Saturdays in a row. The social connector and the Hunter Circles team received several emails and calls asking about Daniels' whereabouts. We explained Daniel had been unwell and twice the social connectors were not available to pick him up so he could attend. (Project team)

Participants started forming diverse connections, in addition to the relationship with the social connectors, as a result of their growing personalised community inclusion and belonging and also through their contributions to the places and people with whom they had become connected.

2.1.4 Growth and confidence

The social experiences over time added to people's confidence in these relationships and future opportunities.

Personal growth and confidence

Participants were happier, more confident and proud of their social connections and community contributions. People who knew them noticed changes in their communication and expression of preferences in other social contexts, including influencing peers.

> Rebecca (Story 12) and Bettina (Story 9), they share what they are up to … bring photos of the community activities, their connections and friends they are making. So this peer sharing is bringing new ideas to other people [in the group home]. Our staff are stretched … but we know that other people [who live here] may be interested to try something similar. (Provider)

Mike's experience (Story 13) demonstrates how a trusted relationship can open new possibilities for communication, choice and agency. Mike is deafblind and had historically recoiled from touch, which had largely been associated with meeting his physical care needs. Through consistent interaction, music and vibration, his social connector built trust and discovered new ways of communicating with him. Mike began reaching for and holding her hand and, significantly, holding and exploring objects. For a person who is deafblind, this opens new possibilities for tactile communication — using objects to express choices about music, a drink, a shower or other aspects of everyday life. These changes increased opportunities for Mike's preferences to be recognised and supported in everyday decision making.

Confidence for future community inclusion

Several participants (3-4) waited to be matched with a social connector with shared interests (Section 3). The project had not found a suitable match or the person was still developing confidence for engagement/connection. For some people in the project, the impact of isolation was profound, they also had no experience of the kinds of experiences or relationships on offer. A more gradual change approach was needed to help them make meaningful choices.

The project team continued to support these participants without a social connector. They continued the discovery process to explore the person's preference for inclusion and to develop a trusting relationship. Peter (Story 15) was waiting to be matched with a volunteer connector. The priority for Peter was to build trust and familiarity with the

project staff, and bring the provider along, setting the conditions of future connection and community inclusion. Peter gradually developed greater confidence to do things outside of his familiar routine and home.

> Peter and I get to know each other on his terms, patiently we started in his bedroom, which is where he feels safest. We talked about his passion for military models … It was important to help the staff understand the [CfE] approach to community … and awareness on why we were taking things so slow … Once Peter was comfortable with meeting me in his home … the car became our "safe space". We drove to a familiar spot and sat in the car, eating lunch … A recent 'win' was … when Peter and I attended an ANZAC Day ceremony. Peter enjoys military parades, but he had not been to one in 35 years. (project team)

2.1.5 Safeguarding decisions and rights through network connections

A longer goal was to increase the number and strength of connections in people's social networks, with the aim to expand choices into the future. Increased connections were also a means for sustaining social networks and relationships.

Some people's networks safeguarded their decisions by increasing the number of people involved in their lives who were actively engaged in understanding and supporting their expressed preferences. Some social connectors had wide social networks, which helped to engage further connectors and community members in the participant's social network. Examples were Daniel (Story 1), Robert (Story 4), and Adam (Story 8). They were increasing their networks through reconnecting with family members and forming relationships with allies, friends and diverse connections. These steps were a longer term goal because of the trust and time needed to develop extended connections.

The project supported some participants to develop longer-term relationships through Circles of Support (Appendix C). This was intensive work. For people who had experienced profound and long-term social isolation, a Circle could not simply be assembled; relationships had to be found, nurtured and sustained over time. The project found that this required a skilled and experienced team with a strong commitment to inclusion and a deep knowledge of the person — their history, communication, interests, gifts, preferences and existing relationships. The work involved identifying who was already 'there' (involved in the person's life), following interests into community, finding places where people could return regularly and become known, making one-to-one invitations, and the project team (or connectors) intentionally 'noticing' other community members with whom a relationship might

grow. It also required supporting community members to move from being welcoming acquaintances to people willing to take a more enduring place in someone's life.

Persistence was critical. The team often had to work beyond established routines, service expectations and assumptions about what was possible for people who had lived highly restricted lives. Rather than accepting initial participation or connection as the end point, the team continually asked, 'What more is possible?' Who else could know this person? Where could they contribute and belong? Which relationships could be deepened? Who might still be there in five or ten years? Building Circles therefore depended as much on the values, judgement, persistence and relational skill of the people doing the work as on any particular model or process.

Establishing safeguarding social networks to support the participant's future choices was a focus in some of the relationships in the second year of the project. These processes were not necessarily sequential, as they could happen simultaneously in some cases. For a few people, social connectors had considered how to deepen their role in ways that focused on safeguarding the person's rights.

By the second year of the project, Mike (Story 13) and Abby, his social connector had developed a trusting relationship over more than a year. Abby discovered Mike's love of sound and vibration and established a regular Sunday acoustic jam session around this interest, bringing other people into his life. As an unpaid person who knows Mike well and is committed to him for the long term, Abby applied for guardianship with the aim of supporting Mike's will and preferences to be understood and upheld in decisions affecting his life and strengthening his autonomy.

Several social connectors said they had started or were 'looking into identifying past or distant family and other connections (Williams' Story 24). An example was engaging a sibling, who applied to become financial guardian, replacing the state-appointed trustee. The intention was to achieve greater autonomy and choice for the participant.

2.2 Outcomes for social connectors

Outcomes for social connectors included connections and friendships with people with intellectual disability; learning and personal growth; awareness of the importance of networks and relationships in the lives of people with intellectual disability; and a shared community and purpose.

2.2.1 Relationships

Social connectors said the relationships they developed in the project were mutually beneficial. They said they gained a richer social life and built meaningful friendships with people with intellectual disability, as well as with other people in the person's life (e.g. through the circle of support, or with other members in the person's community groups).

> Being involved in Robert's life makes me feel valued, it adds to, builds my own enjoyment, so it's a win-win situation … I also enjoy being with the other people, [in the project] … I feel like I found 'my people', like-minded people … We still have a voice, we get to learn from each other, it is brilliant! (Social connector)

> I keep coming back because I get something from the interaction with Theo … If you see someone experiencing joy, it brings you joy, too. (Social Connector)

> I enjoy how happy it makes Daniel … I enjoy going to the parkrun community myself, it's something to do with the family. It's not formal, it is time and opportunity to be outside with others, to connect with a whole range of people. (Social Connector)

Through the new relationships with people with intellectual disability, connectors felt they were introduced to new community activities like gardening and playing music they had no prior involvement in. They said seeing the world 'through different eyes', enriched their involvement.

> We can forget that connection with the community, interacting with other people is so important. So I feel like joining this project not only benefits Rebecca, but it also benefits me, building up my own connections with people. (Social connector)

Social connectors said that the relationship was becoming 'a standard, routine part' of their week, not a 'formal volunteering task', something they looked forward to and truly enjoyed. They reflected that the personal benefit was essential for sustaining and deepening their relationship (Section 4.5).

2.2.2 Learning and personal growth

Social connectors emphasised the varied insights they gained from participating in the project. Connectors with prior familiarity in the disability sector said they were introduced to new ideas and ways of interacting and thinking about relationships with participants. Connectors who had minimal or no contact with people with disability prior to the project said they were introduced to a new area of history, policy and social thinking.

> It affects how I think … I've been in the industry for 15 years … You have to follow all the rules, do the risk assessments for everything … it's so different being in a paid role … but these ideas [from CfE] keep playing on my mind. (Social connector)

> These [project] Meet Ups are so enjoyable and educational – I'm learning so much about how to be inclusive, how we all can make a difference. It has changed my view of disability. (Social connector)

Social connectors said the experience of learning from knowledge shared in the project (peer leaders, stories, videos, capacity building) and from other social connectors were valuable, contributing to their personal growth, but also sustained their involvement in the project. This was because their peer knowledge and meetings contributed to shared problem solving and shaped the way the project developed e.g. on overcoming barriers to engaging and building trust and collaboration with providers (Section 5).

2.2.3 Increased awareness of networks and relationships

Social connectors said their awareness of the importance of relationships, inclusion and belonging in local communities increased from participating in the project. They witnessed the changes and value of social connections and relationships.

> Through the workshops I learnt how strong relationships and social support networks can prevent harm and counter social isolation for people living in group homes. That's why I am part of this project. (Social connector)

> A network of relationships can improve the safety of people with disability and prevent violence, neglect or exploitation in these settings. (Social connector)

2.2.4 Sense of shared community and purpose

Lastly, many social connectors spoke of their strong sense of community and shared purpose in the project. Connectors said they felt it was not a 'solitary undertaking' to get to know and become friends with the participant. Instead, they felt they were involved in a bigger project or 'a small social movement' that aimed to improve social diversity and create communities for everyone.

> We feel we belong and then we're taking that, and bringing other people in, to belong as well. (Social connector)

> Community for Everyone, it's a place for anyone to come and to find their own community or build their own connections with different people in the community and in the project. And, you know, we're all human we all need someone to be human with. (Social connector)

The regular project activities, like the monthly meet ups, BBQs and other social opportunities for connectors, participants and the project team to come together, fostered a strong sense of shared purpose and community. The social connectors identified this element of the project as 'a critical element' for the sustainability of connections between person and connector.

2.3 Outcomes for communities

The project used a combination of indirect and direct ways to engage with community members. The purpose of the engagement was to improve the conditions for inclusion and raise awareness of the right to relationships and individualised, authentic community belonging for profoundly isolated people with intellectual disability.

An indirect influence on communities was when community members attended project activities to learn about or engage in Community for Everyone. They attended community sessions, lunch and learn, conferences and heard radio interviews. They said the project was raising the bar for us all, making headway on how community inclusion was envisioned. One community member also worked as a provider, and said, 'Knowing the project was there', was giving them 'hope for a different future that was more inclusive of diversity'.

The more direct way the project intentionally influenced local communities was through facilitating the conditions for inclusion in the person's preferred social contexts. These actions were by raising awareness about inclusion, actively stimulating small culture change and demonstrating inclusive interactions. This was sometimes done in combination: by presenting and engaging for the community to take an interest and get involved in the project and by stimulating culture change for inclusion with the person with disability.

The project across the 2 years had many examples of impact on local communities and members, especially those with little to no previous interactions with a person with intellectual disability. Examples were Daniel (Story 1) at parkrun; Gabriel (Story 3) at Landcare; Bettina (Story 9) and Rebecca (Story 12) at public library knitting groups; Benjamin (Story 14) at the local trivia, and Adam (Story 8) in the men's dinner group.

An example is Nari's (Story 11), where the project team first presented about Community for Everyone to community members. The presentation stimulated a lively discussion about the inclusiveness and the group's awareness of intellectual disability. Consequently, the congregation and church leader made changes so that Nari could take part and feel welcome, e.g. by including Korean language readings in the cultural church service. Later the congregation extended the invitation to Nari and Nelly, the social connector, to join in other cultural events organised by the group, which led to deeper connections and experiences.

> Church group members said that they felt more curious to learn from other people with intellectual disability. So the church hosted a 'listening meeting' organised by the Sydney Alliance and Side By Side Advocacy to learn about the de-institutionalisation history and social isolation … These presentations raised further questions about what the congregation can do to be more inclusive … The group voted 'social isolation of people with disability' as a key focus for their future work. (Community member)

The project team reported similar experiences across many of the other social context and community groups where people with intellectual disability became known and found a sense of belonging.

> We hear this all the time, we have become more 'welcoming places' in the community … It feels as though [the groups] were only waiting to be asked for the opportunity to include a person with intellectual disability. We get this feedback a lot, groups saying, our community is now stronger, prouder, more diverse … there is more joy, because of that person's involvement. (Project team)

The indirect and direct community engagement strategies demonstrated impacts on community members and community groups where the person with intellectual disability and connector were involved.

2.4 Outcomes for families

The project demonstrated that reuniting families was possible, usually over a long timeframe, beyond the two year project. These connections required time to find who and where the family might be, and the conditions in which the participant and family might be able to overcome harm from past institutional exclusionary practices.

> I was thinking I'd like to make contact with Robert's sister, if he wanted it … But I am aware about doing it trauma-informed, and how to keep finding people who were connected in the past and keep building on those relationships … Being able to reconnect Robert with people and family. (Social connector)

Reconnecting with family members was successful over a 2.5 year period for one person, who had engaged with a social connector 18 months prior to the commencement of the Community for Everyone project. Adam's story demonstrates the longer term investment, dedicated questioning and commitment from a range of stakeholders (guardians and providers) required to achieve family reconnection. Providers in the project said this type of relationship building work was outside their capacity. They acknowledged that grassroot programs, like Community for Everyone might achieve it.

> To reconnect Adam (Story 8) with his … siblings … that's extraordinary. I think it's really helped Adam to feel connected, also for his family members. They realise that having a brother … previously in an institution is nothing to be ashamed of … giving his family the opportunity to recognise that … to be connected and celebrate birthdays together is a truly remarkable outcome for Adam and his entire family. (Provider)

A family member described how she was reassured seeing Adam participate in everyday activities and forming friendships. Adam's siblings, who remained disconnected from their brother for most of their adult life, said Adam establishing a rich and socially connected life with the support of Hunter Circles, improved their own wellbeing.

> We are grateful for the generosity and support we received from Hunter Circles. Adam today has a circle of friendships, enriching his life profoundly … Last year, our family, all siblings, we gathered with Adam for the first time in 50 years to

> celebrate his birthday. This was a huge moment for us all … stepping out of family trauma … to normalising our relationship with our dear brother. My brother and Alfred the social connector have developed a true friendship, bushwalking and dining and listening to music. (Family member)

Providers commented that the closure of large institutions was confusing for some family members. They described families seeing the participant now thriving in the community, doing ordinary things with other people (Daniel, Story 1) as reassuring for families.

> Daniel's community inclusion in the parkrun community, it certainly helps his mum to be satisfied, you know, knowing he is living a really good quality of life … after exiting [large institution], and all the concerns everybody had. (Provider)

Another family member, Denise, commented that being involved in her brother Gabriel's life now was beneficial to her own life, through becoming part of her brother's circle of support, which she described as 'truly meaningful experience'.

> As Gabriel's sister (Story 3), being part of my brothers' journey has been incredibly rewarding. I've learned about the power of consistency, patience and taking hopeful action. This experience has reinforced my belief that community can do this — and it should … Gabriel is happy, confident and surrounded by people who genuinely care about him. (Family member)

Reconnecting with family and friends was a longer term goal of Community for Everyone. Evidence from stories where this was possible demonstrated it was possible to achieve such major social change with sufficient time and resources. In instances where such rekindling of family was achieved, it had profound social impact for the person and family.

2.5 Outcomes for disability services

Raising awareness within disability services about the possibilities and significance of personalised community inclusion and social relationships was an indirect outcome from the project. The services where the participants lived or were supported became more involved and supportive of the CfE approach when they witnessed the benefits from the approach and outcomes. The support from the services was also critical for the engagement with participants and sustainability of connections between participants, social connectors and community groups (Section 4.5).

2.5.1 Witnessing change

Services witnessed changes in people's lives, through the friendships with social connectors and community members, meaningful community inclusion and changes to personal wellbeing, confidence or communication.

We see [participants] … they really flourish … we see them happier. People feel respected … when I'm thinking about what would make their life more interesting, meaningful. (Provider)

> [Community for Everyone] is pushing us … to try new ideas … to think what Mike might like … enjoy. The staff are also content to know Mike has other people in his life now … But seeing Mike come out of his shell … the staff are supportive; they have come on board. (Provider, Story 23)

Providers witnessed meaningful change for the focus person through first hand experiences (eg, seeing the person happier and more engaged in their community) and seeing evidence of deepening, meaningful inclusion. The project team shared photos, videos and other story formats during the project, which were effective ways of engaging trust from providers in the project.

2.5.2 Influencing change from within

The project's success relied on developing engagement with providers (e.g. engagement of participants, harnessing provider's input and ideas in the discovery process, gaining trust to grow meaningful connections and inclusion) (see Section 4.1). This required persistence and a problem-solving approach in the early phase of the project to overcome barriers to engagement (see Section 3.2).

Providers said communication between provider staff, social connectors and project team was 'respectful, trustworthy and reliable' and transparent about the approach (see Provider Stories of change 20, 21 and 23). This approach meant they could work together for the benefit of the participant and learn from each other.

> At first some staff were sceptical … But seeing Mike come out of his shell, the staff … they have come on board. … What was convincing was the consistency of the approach: showing up, same time, asking questions, spending quality time with Mike, and feeding information back to us, e.g. about the things [the connector] identified that might be helpful. (Provider, Story 23)

These positive experiences with the project became motivators for providers to intensify their collaboration with Community for Everyone and extend the social

inclusion approach to the people receiving their services. Some managers mentioned the benefit of 'seeing different ways of doing inclusion' and making it meaningful for the focus person.

> As a provider we can get stuck in the mindset, 'Oh we have tried that before, it didn't work'. So, with Community for Everyone, I feel we are pushing some limits, shaking things up a little … Mike started to reach towards other people, seeking touch, which he had not done previously. (Provider, Story 23)

Gradually developing shared understanding and goals about the project with providers generated some culture change within some services. An example was where a service manager waived the internal mandatory risk assessments for social community outings with connectors.

> Community for Everyone at the start talking to the staff, being open and transparent about what it is and how it could work, that was important to gain staff trust. Also the management decided not to do any risk assessments for the social outings, we treat them as someone going to see their family. The connectors are friends and they are going out together. It's helped shaped how we think about community engagement as an organisation. (Provider, Story 20).

2.5.3 Building from the approach to community inclusion

Community for Everyone demonstrated that change in service practices – staff beliefs and attitudes and small practice changes – was possible in some services. A couple of providers trialled new ways of supporting the person consistent with their expressed preferences. One provider supported the person to attend additional community groups that matched the person's interests.

> The homes themselves are looking at other ways they can do things … this may include finding similar community activities for the person to join on another day of the week … They are considering the approach we have taken, adapting some of the activities … This is because they've seen how much [Daniel] loves being part of the parkrun community. (Project team)

> And [the group home staff] actually started to follow up things that our social connectors are not doing, but they themselves can do to broaden the horizons of the person they're supporting. So, that's been quite exciting to witness. (Project team)

Several services extended the approach of personalised community inclusion opportunities for people when they saw the outcomes in the project. The project relied on this type of investment by providers to sustain the community inclusion outcomes of the project. The social connectors had limited time to spend with a person each week/fortnight and the project had constrained time and resourcing.

Developing a collaborative and trusting approach with services was essential for the project. The approach necessitated repeated, iterative, relational engagement and trust building with multiple staff and managers to account for staff change and turnover. Trust building could take many months, especially where the project team did not have existing relationships with providers (Section 4.6).

3. Engagement processes

Summary of engagement processes

Engagement with people with intellectual disability was through the organisations and places people were likely to be socially isolated. This required gaining provider and decision makers' trust, then meeting the person many times to gain their informed consent or assent to participate.

Engagement with service providers where people lived or worked built from existing contacts or established new contacts. Both approaches took time to build trust often over many months through consistent, relational and respectful engagement to demonstrate the potential of the approach.

Engagement with social connectors was through wide promotion in the local community, followed by personal discussions. Another approach was personalised engagement by attending places with the participant to strengthen possible connections. The expectations of a social connector became flexible about time, commitment and training to respond to social connectors' capacity and motivations.

The first step of the project was to engage with people with intellectual disability who were socially isolated, the service providers where people lived or worked and potential social connectors. This section analyses the approaches the project took to engage with them. Section 4 analyses how, once the people and organisations were engaged, the project team and social connectors built and strengthened these relationships.

3.1 Engaging people with intellectual disability

The project connected with people through the organisations and places where people were likely to be socially isolated (group homes, sheltered employment and day programs), mainly people who previously lived in institutions.

Gaining provider and decision maker's trust

The aim was to get to know and engage new people with intellectual disability in the project by working alongside providers where they had existing awareness of Side By Side Advocacy and Hunter Circles and they indicated some support for the Community for Everyone Project (Section 3.2). Starting from providers known to the project team meant they already had some trust with some staff members. This approach was helpful to engage people with intellectual disability because it was possible to meet directly with people with intellectual disability.

Interest and trust in the project happened over time and was maintained through ongoing conversations and engagement with providers and decision-makers (legal Guardians, family members). This included conversations with management, service provider participation in information sessions and workshops about the Community for Everyone project (Section 3.2). The project team met with people with intellectual disability in the service to inform them about the opportunity and gain consent.

Engaging with the person

The process for initial engagement varied by person or location. One approach was to first meet people in a group. Another approach was to meet each person. Both approaches involved meeting many times over several months to get to know each other and seek the person's interest and to build trust (Section 2.1.1). Some people did not use words to communicate, so it was crucial to have a trusted communication partner present. Easy read documents were used to assist in describing the project. Images of possible opportunities for community engagement were also used. Consideration was given to what would put people at ease to have these exploratory conversations, for example, morning tea, local cafe or a short walk.

> What is convincing is the consistency of this approach: showing up, at the same time, asking questions, spending quality time with Mike. (Provider, Story 23)

Informed consent and assent to take part

All people with intellectual disability gave consent or assent to be involved. Some people with intellectual disability made their own decisions directly. In one instance, a person expressed their interest, but the provider doubted whether it was in the person's 'best interest'. This hesitation led to the person withdrawing, despite their initial enthusiasm. Another person who was involved in an earlier project with similar aims was unable to continue their involvement because the group home withdrew their permission for the person to continue. All other people with intellectual disability who expressed interest and started with Community for Everyone continued their involvement over two years – no one changed their mind.

Unintended consequences

An unintended consequence of promoting the project was some people with disability who already had informal and community connections, also approached the project seeking a social connector. These were conversations for the project team to manage sensitively as the project had limited capacity and eligibility criteria focusing on profound isolation. The project team helped link several people to other suitable services such as peer support and self-advocacy groups.

3.2 Engaging with providers where people live and spend their time

Engaging with people with intellectual disability meant Community for Everyone needed to first start engaging with the service providers where people lived or spent their time. The project worked with 11 providers.

The project took two approaches to engaging with providers. The first was to build from existing contacts with providers. The second was to establish new contacts and collaborative relationships. The second approach took more time to build new trust through gradual engagement over many months.

3.2.1 Engaging with known providers

The project team worked alongside service providers where they had existing contacts due to the in-reach and out-reach activities and advocacy with people with intellectual disability in services and the local community. The project needed to build further trust to consolidate commitment with these providers who already knew them. More trust was necessary because of staff and management turnover and the novel approach to community inclusion.

Effective strategies to gain provider trust

Effective strategies to gain a trusting and responsive relationship with providers who knew Side By Side Advocacy and Hunter Circles included:

- a consistent, relational and respectful approach (repeated visits, listening to provider concerns, seeking common ground, setting shared goals)
- providing documentation so that service providers could facilitate approval for participation when needed

- building from authenticity through lived experience storytelling from the perspective of people with intellectual disability and social connectors in the project
- operating with transparency, affording anyone interested opportunities to attend community events, hear about the project and activities first-hand
- showcasing project activities on the projects' websites (videos, written testimonials, storytelling).

These strategies combined were a relational approach that assisted the project to overcome early concerns and engage providers in the project. Providers directly hearing and seeing examples of the approach to community inclusion through the stories shared in person or by video were helpful. They demonstrated change could be achieved and helped overcome suspicions about the motivations of the social connectors.

> We're always transparent, everyone's welcome [to the community sessions], you know, come and join us at any time. We're not doing anything secret … Suspicions about the volunteer motivations were overcome through positive interactions and by providers attending community events … hearing directly from social connectors about their intentions. (Project team)

Levels of engagement with service providers differed between organisations and over time, depending on consistency of relationships, continuous provider leadership involvement and organisational buy-in (see, for example, Provider Story 22).

3.2.2 Engaging with new providers

The second approach was to engage with new providers to reach isolated people with intellectual disability. The purpose of engaging new providers was so the project could engage more people with intellectual disability.

Over the two years, the project continued to seek out new providers and worked with providers where the trust needed to be bolstered to become re/involved in Community for Everyone. One example of engaging with a new provider is detailed in Story 22. The provider's leaders first heard of the project at an academic conference. The leaders said they had 'strong value alignment' with the project. The leadership commitment and buy-in still took many months between planning meetings and frontline staff making time to meet with social connectors (Story 22).

> What helped was that our organisation's vision, from the board down, aligned … we had started groundwork with another expert, working on building capacity of our staff around supporting relationships and decisions, reviewing our internal processes. [As a leader] I felt we had a licence to go in with Community for Everyone … but it still took many meetings and follow up to bring everyone on board. (Provider, Story 22)

> When things feel stuck or move slowly … we can see that the 'right' relationship [with someone senior who is committed], built with mutual respect and trust, can lead to change. We are gradually establishing access with new services. (Project team)

Gradual engagement with providers

Successful engagement with new services included working with a contact where the staff member showed interest in the project. The project started with a gradual approach with new providers, rather than formalised agreements, which could impede trust building and were time consuming. The risk of not taking time to build relational work was that access could be revoked. The project team also used the lived experience stories (videos, testimonials, photos) of other people with disability and social connectors to demonstrate the project's approach and outcomes.

> Sharing stories is a very, very powerful way of doing that … I feel more confident about helping others. It's about getting people to think differently. About challenging stereotypes. (Peer leader)

Trust was achieved by developing relationships with frontline staff through repeated, respectful and positive interactions and demonstrating reliability, information sharing and listening to concerns. For example, a social connector would visit a participant regularly, establishing trust through consistency. Examples of gradually built trust with a new provider and the person with intellectual disability are demonstrated by Adam and Alfred's (Story 8) and Story 15, where Peter and the project team developed the conditions for Peter's future connection.

Overcoming barriers to engagement

A challenge for the project was how to gain trust and build engagement with providers of services for people with intellectual disability live who had lived in large institutions. The project encountered barriers of institutionalised culture, distrust of community projects, risk averse culture and policies (including barriers from public guardians) and limited opportunities for people in the service to make choices (see Section 4.6).

> I understand that there is a bit of protectiveness on our part … letting clients go out with people we don't know … Yeah, but [the project team] did a great job to alleviate our worries and concerns … I could really see the value of the project for people to have friends outside of paid staff. (Service manager)

Some providers were sceptical of the Community for Everyone approach to community inclusion by connecting one person at a time with a social connector, developing the relationship and encouraging conditions for inclusion in the person's preferred community contexts. This approach was new for services more used to managing risk in group-based settings. Some services chose to trial this person-centred approach to community inclusion (Provider, Story 20). Other providers who engaged later after seeing the benefits of the approach remained wary.

3.3 Engaging social connectors and the community

The project used a combination of ways to reach potential social connectors of people with intellectual disability based on community building and community engagement strategies. The main purpose of the activities was to promote the project's approach and engage supporters (connectors, providers, community members and allies of people with intellectual disability).

3.3.1 Finding social connectors through community engagement

The project took a community engagement approach to engagement. Over two years, the project engaged a total of 23 volunteer social connectors (2 left the project for various reasons). The project engaged community members through a variety of strategies. Some community members became social connectors.

Ways to engage social connectors

The engagement approach to promote the social connector role and the project included

- running repeated online and in person information sessions, with informal presentations at community organisations, local clubs and social gatherings (churches, associations, TAFE and other training institutions)
- reach through diverse media from radio interviews to academic conferences
- sharing project updates by email and online (newsletter, project website)

- presenting at volunteering expos and community forums where people are known to seek out volunteering opportunities
- via community groups when a person was supported to be included regularly, and where opportunities emerged to invite deeper involvement with the person
- via personal connections amongst the project team and the growing social connector network, who learned to the skills of asking and inviting.

When community members expressed interest in Community for Everyone, steps to engage social connectors included

- Providing information about the expectations of the role through personal conversations, mostly in person
- Follow up discussions to give interested participants information and options about being involved
- Inviting community members who were not yet decided to attend monthly project meetings, workshops or other events hosted by Community for Everyone to keep them engaged.

Potential volunteers wanted to understand more about the intentions of the project: how their availability could align with the commitment for building relationships set out by the project; level of skills or past experience being with people with intellectual disability (and people who use different forms of communication); travel time, transportation requirements, the location of activities/meetings, training requirements.

Part of the process of sharing information about the project at the start and throughout was to communicate the principles of authentic community inclusion and the centrality of relationships for safeguarding the decisions of people with intellectual disability with the community (friends, family members, providers, allies, interested citizens).

Adding flexible ways to engage

The project team managed some challenges engaging social connectors. The role of the connector was 'a bespoke, unique' form of volunteering, that required good listening, relationship and communications skills, and a longer term commitment was also implied with the role.

These uncertainties about the social connector role and the required capacity were potential barriers to engagement for some connectors. The project addressed the uncertainties through personal engagement (by pioneer connectors), lived experience

storytelling by peer leaders, people with intellectual disability and connectors in the project and more flexible expectations and requirements to become a social connector.

Over the two years, the project team introduced several changes and options to the social connector role, e.g. around training expectations and required commitment. The original plan was to provide comprehensive training for new connectors run over several days. This was gradually reduced to training as needed to reduce the barrier of the training time commitment.

Another change was adapting the time and frequency of social connection. The original plan was 5 hours per week, which changed to connect flexibly, such as

- regularly, weekly or monthly
- as part of a group of connectors in someone's life
- with a person into a social connector's current community activity.

Engagement by more social connectors increased after these types of flexibility were suggested, including gradual, stepping stone options to become involved in the project or becoming part of a social circle, without taking on the commitment of a full social connector role. An example was Dot's Story of change (Story 16).

3.3.2 Personalised ways to find social connectors

Personalised ways to engage with social connectors were to start at the places, community activities and services where the person with intellectual disability was already engaged. In the discovery phase of getting to know the person, the project team, together with the participant, attended the community places the person knew (e.g., places of worship, social groups) to check for opportunities to strengthen connections. Another reason for attending together was to find potential community members who may be engaged as a social connector. Nari (Story 11) is an example of the project team successfully finding a personalised social connector within Nari's preferred cultural community group.

3.3.3 Motivations for social connectors to become engaged

Social connectors had a range of motivations to become engaged

- Interest in community development and collective responsibility
- Interest in human rights, inclusion and social justice

- Curiosity and trust in the project – its leadership, other peer social connectors, the project's purpose and approach
- Already connected with people with intellectual disability (personal or professional)
- Seeking social connection and community – wish to expand one's own connections and friendships with people with and without intellectual disability.

Social connectors emphasised community responsibility as a core motivation, appreciating a local approach to building diverse, inclusive communities. Many connectors stressed the importance of relationships and community inclusion as a human right of everyone.

> It's a bold project. Government tries to solve problems by throwing money at it, money is not everything; this [Community for Everyone] is trying a different way. I wanted to learn and do something else … they sounded very authentic, and that's really important to me. (Social connector)

> My personal interest has always been community development. I believe that every individual is part of something greater, I believe in the collective. (Social connector)

Hearing from peer leaders, stories by people with intellectual disability and the pioneer (early) social connectors were effective ways to demonstrate the authenticity, purpose, and relevance of the project, necessary to gain trust from potential social connectors.

Social connectors joined because they felt the importance of relationships and lived experience shared through the project community engagement (events, meetings and radio). Many connectors visited the project websites and had personal conversations with the project team. Others joined or became aware of the project because they knew of someone who was part of the project (a connector, project member, peer leader) (Dot's Story 16).

> My initial connection was through one of the peer leaders. My mum has a connection with, one of the peer leaders … And myself, professionally, I have had different roles and interaction in the disability community … In my work, often I see people who are profoundly socially isolated, and the project gave me a way of changing that. (Social connector)

Several social connectors had personal or professional connections with people with intellectual disability, such as siblings. Other social connectors also had current or

past professional experience in the disability sector. They said the project opened an opportunity for them to form equal, meaningful connections with people, which attracted them to the project.

> I am a new connector. I was motivated to join because I worked in a group home in the past, I built a connection with one of the residents. After I left that job, I wanted a way of maintaining this friendship, reconnecting with the person. (Social connector)

Social connectors without previous experience or connection to someone with intellectual disability saw the project as a way to learn about and see the world through another person's eyes. All the social connectors mentioned the project was a way to expand their own social networks in their local community.

3.3.4 Challenges for ongoing engagement

Maintaining a flow of engagement of new social connectors in the second year was a challenge. Fewer new social connectors joined after the initial promotion of the project. The initial strategies like word-of-mouth and community development seemed to become less effective. The team relied more on personalised engagement (Section 3.3.2), which although time consuming, had the advantage that the match with the person was more direct (Section 4.2).

The team said that a barrier to growth of the project was how to find new social connectors. Reasons to continue to engage new connectors were to find suitable connectors for new participants, replace connectors when they left for personal reasons and connecting a participant to more than one social connector for stability and flexibility (see Section 3.3.4).

Ideally each person with disability was connected with one or more social connectors. A few people were connected with multiple connectors (Daniel (Story 1); Adam (Story 8)). This approach had the benefit of sustaining a person's community inclusion during times of change (e.g. a connector being unwell or moving away). Some people with intellectual disability remained without a social connector relationship due to the challenges of engaging new suitable connectors.

4. Connecting and sustaining relationships

Summary of connecting and sustaining relationships

Getting to know the person required prolonged deep listening, using ways to support their expression and choice and identifying their existing connections, from which to make personalised iterative plans for inclusion.

Connecting between the person and social connector required planning for compatibility, informed choices, and building familiarity and trust by spending regular times together in their preferred places.

Building the relationship and community inclusion required conditions that were respectful and personalised, consistent and predictable to everyone involved, shared interests and support from the project team.

Sustaining these connections required actively building the conditions for inclusion that would extend the person's connections and network. These conditions also supported the social connector's commitment. The project team supported any changes in these connections.

Sustaining collaboration with providers was critical to the success of approach and time consuming. It required sustained communication and problem solving to demonstrate the benefits of the approach. The project team found allies to maintain the commitment.

Section 4 describes the approach to connecting, building and developing relationships, and social connectors growing conditions for inclusion within the person's preferred community contexts.

The steps in connecting and building relationships were getting to know the person, identifying their existing key social relationships and preferences for community inclusion, connecting between the person and social connector, getting to know each other, building the relationship, social connectors growing conditions for community inclusion, strengthening of community inclusion through the person becoming 'known' by others in the social context, sustaining and deepening social connections (between the person and connectors and other community members), including develop collaborative approach with providers. In practice these processes overlapped.

4.1 Getting to know the person

Once people with intellectual disability were engaged the project team continued to spend time getting to know them. This was done by spending time together to understand their preferences. Getting to know the person occurred where people lived or worked and where they liked to spend time in the community.

Deep listening

The early phase of getting to know the person was mostly done by the project team, sometimes, together with the social connector. The aim of this slow, intentional and iterative process of deep listening was to develop trust with the person and to support their choice by attending to their preferences and interests in community inclusion. People expressed their preferences through words, their bodies, gestures, actions and using other forms of communication.

Supporting expression and choice

The project used prompts like photos and easy read information, and videos of activities/events. Examples to stimulate input included: gardening, walking in nature, cooking/baking, outdoor hobbies, like fishing, art/crafts, music/singing, time with pets/native animals, doing things together with other people.

Another way of seeking indirect input was asking people who know the person well (e.g. family member, provider) about the person's favourite, past activities or interests. The project team were careful not to limit a person's interests to their current activities. The project was aware of the limited choice many people had to follow their interests or try new activities in community groups.

Mapping and identifying existing connections

Getting to know the person, their interests and potential social connections involved mapping existing social networks. The map included all known active or distant family, friends, housemates, neighbours, paid support and casual weak community ties, like a person in their social context (e.g. church/group). Social network mapping was done using inputs and information from speaking to paid supporters, informal connections at the community places the person attended, and other people who knew the person or spent time together.

Personalised planning for inclusion

The information about a person's current and past interests and relationships was gathered with the participant at the centre. The information was regularly updated, particularly with input from the social connectors once they spent time with the person.

Information, observations and notes later informed personalised planning for community inclusion. Person centred and intentional planning meant the opportunities for community inclusion started from the person's interests, their current enjoyments (e.g. knitting, singing, walking; e.g. Bettina Story 9). They also informed new community activities the person wanted to explore. For example, Murray (Story 6) realised his dream of volunteering at the community garden.

Iterative and attentive

Many participants tried new experiences and social community contexts, which meant that sometimes the activity, location or time did not meet their expectations. This meant the team and social connectors took a trial and error approach. They sought feedback from the person and social connectors about the suitability of the activity or social context to make adjustments.

For example, James (Story 10), who communicates informally by using gestures, initially expressed interest in the local gardening group. After several months attending the garden with the social connector, James changed his mind. The project team met with James to understand his preferences for community inclusion. James and the project team worked out an alternative activity of dog walking instead (Story 10).

Story 10: James – Managing change in the connection

The project team met with James to make a change, showing him a range of new photos of things to do. He indicated he loves animals. A few weeks later James and Jimmy (social connector) went to a dog show, which they both enjoyed, smiling faces all around.

Building from this promising sign of interest, Jimmy had a friend who lived locally with a dog. He arranged to walk the dog. Now, James and Jimmy meet up and take his friends dog for walks. James seems to enjoy the experience.

Working closely with the service provider was really important in this change situation. They helped us brainstorm possibly alternatives. They also suggested new things that we could explore, like an Auslan Sign language course at the library because James wants to work on his communication skills.

4.2 Connecting between the person and social connector

The project used various ways to match the participant with a compatible social connector and to try again if the first match was not suitable.

Planning for compatibility

Compatibility included considerations of shared interests, talents, gender, ethnicity/cultural background, proximity (location, transport) and characteristics (e.g., preferences for quiet/noise, stimulation, activity/less active/talkative). Robert's experience (Story 4), for example, demonstrates how a shared interest in music provided a basis for developing the relationship.

The project tried to get to know both the focus person and social connectors well to inform the pairing process. Predicting who may get along well was not simple and some matching involved trial and error. One way to establish a connection was to create casual opportunities (e.g. BBQ, live music event) for potential matches to meet up without expectations for a connection. Checking how people and connectors responded to each other was an important first step in understanding the participant's preference about whether the connection should continue.

Practical considerations were also important, including the availability of both people, transport, existing routines and the timing of local groups that met regularly related to their shared interests. Rather than adding the Social Connector to existing provider-led activities, the project sought shared-interest community opportunities outside participants' paid-support schedules. This enabled participants and Social Connectors to establish their own routines and provided time and space for the relationship to develop independently of paid services.

Supporting choice and preference

5.1.1 Participants were supported to express preferences about who they spent time with and what they did together, including changing their mind (Section 5.1.1). For participants who did not communicate preferences verbally, the team considered other expressions of preference, including engagement, enjoyment, withdrawal and responses to particular people and activities. There was no information about a person asking to change their social connector or being dissatisfied with the person they had been 'matched' with. However, the project did not rely on an explicit request as the only indication of whether a connection was working, particularly for participants with significant communication support needs. The social connector's preference was also important. One social connector shared how they met a participant informally, spending a couple of hours together with the project team, but found they did not have 'sufficient chemistry' to continue building the relationship. Rita (Story 17), a social

connector, shared her experience of finding compatibility in the relationship and its importance for the quality of the connection.

Story 17: Rita's experience of compatibility in the connection with Robert

I am semi-retired … still I really wanted to get involved more with my community. When I heard of the project, I was all in … When I started, the project team introduced me to one man. We casually spent a couple of hours together, all three of us (including the CfE team member), but it seemed I and the person, we didn't quite get along, there was no connection between us. I didn't feel like the [participant] wanted to spend time with me.

A week later [the project staff] introduced me to Robert, we have something in common. We instantly clicked, we got along well that first day … I can say, I really enjoy spending time with Robert and getting to know him better. I am interested to find out more about him, what he enjoys and likes and what he doesn't like. Robert is clear about what he wants he will express himself clearly. I am learning to read him and understand what he is saying to me.

Importantly, Robert and I, we both seem to enjoy each other's company, we like doing the activity together, we laugh and sing together, we have fun … It has certainly been an enriching experience for me.

The project team met with the people with disability during the months they were waiting to be connected. Some participants remained without a social connector match or waited months for a connection to be confirmed. In a couple of relationships a social connector changed (e.g. disengaged for personal reasons) and the person was later matched with a new connector (Section 4.5).

The reasons some participants waited to be matched were the team was

- seeking to engage a suitable match
- developing conditions for the person's inclusion (e.g. Peter's Story 15)
- supporting a person's community inclusion in the interim (e.g. after a social connector disengaged; Rebecca's Story 12) and a new connector was yet to be identified.

The skill and commitment of the project team were critical to the process of matching and also in ensuring participants had person centred support during times of change/transitions in the connection (see 4.5).

4.3 Getting to know each other

Once the person and social connector were matched and both felt they had a connection to build from, they started by regularly spending time together to get to know each other. This time was about to build trust, familiarity and connection through repetition – intentional, attentive and slow paced relationship building.

Building familiarity with the person

They met at the person's preferred location (group home, day program, a public space) at a set time each week or fortnight. Early stages of trust building could take weeks to several months. Spending casual time together meant doing activities the person already enjoyed or attending community places together. Learning about each other's interests, preferences and communication styles.

Getting to know each other was finding out more about each other, opportunities for connection and interests. For example, in Mike's Story 13 the social connector, attuning with Mike's communication, discovered Mike's passion for sounds and vibrations, leading to a new kind of community involvement (social music session).

Building trust with other people

The early stage was also to develop a collaborative approach with the provider and other key people in the person's life, such as people they regularly interacted with (e.g. neighbour, friend) or decision makers (guardian) (Murray's Story 6; Adam's Story 8). In Murray's Story 6, the provider emphasised the elements of successful relationship development with the person, connector and provider: consistency, reliability, showing up at the same time and place to build mutually trusting relationships over time. They emphasised the importance of the collaborative approach for sustainability in the relationship change (Section 4.5).

Story 6: Murray and Alfred getting to know each other

Murray is in his 60s. Most of his life he lived in institutions. Since the NDIS, Murray was supported move into a group home. Murray has legal orders that manage the activities he can engage in. Once everyone was on board, (including providers and guardians), the project introduced Murray and Alfred, who share a passion for nature and the outdoors.

Murray said he wanted to become part of the project to fulfill his "lifelong dream" of gardening or volunteering. "I wanted to do something more interesting everyday than just filling in colours". Also, "I wanted to meet new people" (Murray)

After hearing about the project, one senior support staff said, "I thought [the project] was a really good opportunity for Murray to expand his social networks, make connections outside. I could see, when I asked Murray, he was clearly interested. So, together, we decided to just give it a go." (Provider)

Alfred, the social connector said, "We started getting around and building trust. Me turning up, consistently … Initially, of course, it was important that we 'just got on' with each other. I took time to learn about understand what Murray likes doing and vice versa. We started with going for short walks [around the area where Murray lives]. We observed animals and birds, once we saw an echidna. Those quiet catch ups were good, we were clearly getting on well. It built familiarity between us." Over six months, Murray and Alfred got to know each other, regularly doing activities together and visiting places further afield in the community.

4.4 Relationship building and growing community inclusion

Elements for successful relationship building in Community for Everyone evident in the stories (Appendix A) were

- Continued listening for person's preferences and will (e.g. ongoing consent/assent)
- Slow-paced, respectful and consistent approach to developing connections
- 'Same place, same time, same person' to build trust with each other and community inclusion
- Pursuit of shared interests
- Support and mentorship from project team (e.g. inputs, ideas for community connections, overcoming change and disruption, reflective practice).

These elements were central to the relationship building between the person and social connectors. They also applied to developing connections between the person and

community members in their preferred community and social contexts.

4.4.1 Respectful and personalised

Building the relationship between the person and connector relied on conditions that maintained respect, sharing of information, consent, consistency and person-centeredness. Connectors continued attentive listening and taking a slow-paced approach to spending quality time together. Community inclusion was established as a gradual process, as people became comfortable trying new things (places, activity, unfamiliar people) on their preferred time and pace.

The project team encouraged social connectors to be observant when introducing changes, providing accessible information (photos, videos) to scaffold changes ahead of time, using many small steps, and remaining observant to the responses and reactions of the person at the centre. Respectful engagement also meant communicating clearly with everyone. For example, Daniel (Story 1), who attended parkrun for 1.5 years, wanted to know when Dina the connector would meet with him. The time was set in advance, but it could change on some weeks or be cancelled due to illness. Any changes required a phone call to the provider. Dina and the project team, after a year sought to improve the means of communication, so that Daniel was better informed and in control of any decisions (Story 1).

> We have set us a WhatsApp chat and community members from parkrun and the social connectors in Daniel's life use the chat to stay in touch with him and each other during the week. (social connector)

4.4.2 Consistent and predictable

Consistency meant meeting at the person's preferred place, at the same time, so that both the person and other people around them, like providers (Section 3.2.2), knew what to expect.

> Me turning up, consistently … Initially, it was important that we 'just got on' with each other. I took time to learn about understand what Murray likes doing and vice versa. … (Murray, Story 6)

The consistency extended to the person's preferred community inclusion and social contexts (e.g. spiritual groups, pet walking, gardening, volunteering, trivia or knitting). The person and connector attended and participated in the person's preferred group at a regular time and day of the week/month, with the same people (Section 2.1.3). This

approach helped establish connections between the person, connector and other group members.

> What really works is that we go to the same event [parkrun], same day, same time, with the same people – this repetition and routine works well. (Circle member Daniel, Story 1)

> What helped [our staff] in the beginning was the consistency, Abby [connector] came each week, at the same time [to meet with Mike] … we could start trusting the program. (Provider Story 23)

4.4.3 Shared interests

People and social connectors pursuing a meaningful activity they both enjoyed and looked forward sustained the development of connections.

> Daniel and I share other interests … we both enjoy motorbikes. Once a month, we go to my brother's bike-riding club. We sit down, have a chat and a sausage roll. So, it's just like any friendship. We enjoy each other's company. (Social Connector, Story 19)

People with disability and social connectors who were in the project between 1 to 2 years emphasised the importance of 'enjoyment' as a driver of their continued relationship and involvement in the project.

4.4.4 Support from the project team

Building the relationship and community connections also relied on support and mentorship from the project team to the person and social connector. The project team supported them to gradually extend from the familiar service environment into community groups.

> It is easy for us to assume, everyone wants to be part of the community … everyone has the right to be included and known, but it can have a negative impact. People have had negative past experiences, therefore, we need to be mindful … how we bring about changes, so no harm is done. The person remains in control. (Project staff)

Connectors regularly sought guidance and mentoring about the steps they could take, such as building trust and communication with providers, ideas to strengthen a

person's community inclusion; help with addressing change (e.g. person changing their mind about a community activity). The project team also supported the person's community involvement during changes in the relationship, such as when connectors changed due to illness or personal circumstances. The project team managed the written communication and maintaining communication with providers and decision makers.

4.5 Sustaining and deepening connections

The project was long enough to develop ways to sustain relationships between the person, social connector and community connections. Elements they developed were

- Conditions for community inclusion in a person's preferred context
- Extending connections in a person's network
- Growth in social connector engagement
- Support for transitions and change in the connection, as well as
- Sustaining collaboration with providers (Section 4.6)

4.5.1 Growing the conditions for community inclusion

The social connectors and project team established the conditions for community inclusion in the person's preferred social contexts and influenced culture change. Examples of influencing the conditions for inclusion were: making sure the person felt at ease and welcome in the group (e.g. facilitating introductions); identifying opportunities for socialising (e.g. times when the group hold morning tea); bringing morning tea to share with others (gifts and contributions); celebrating person's birthday and other events; attending to group awareness about changes needed to include the person (e.g. avoiding conditions that excluded or upset the person unintentionally).

Examples of community groups celebrating the person and their contributions, including birthdays were Nari (Story 11); Benjamin (Story 14); Daniel (Story 1), and Adam (Story 8) with his family. An example of culture change in a social group context was when the parkrun community understood how certain words, like saying 'Let's go', could hurt and upset Daniel (Story 1). Instead, the group and people closest to Daniel learned to use other encouraging words.

Another way the project paved conditions for inclusion was by simply not giving up. This included a deliberate project process of careful observation and attentiveness, problem identification and solving by the project team and social connectors. They focused on finding strengths and opportunities to build from them. The team continued to find alternatives for the person's preferred community connections inclusion, such as the right group close to home that was more accessible or welcoming.

> My favourite part about [the project] is how it's personalised to each person … Very person centred, and I like that [activities] can continue … that [the project] has connected them to … [The team] really don't give up, you keep on looking until you find something that fits … If there is a problem or barrier with one group, well, we're just going to try it a different way. (Provider)

4.5.2 Extending connections in person's network

A mechanism to deepen and sustain a person's community belonging, connections and to safeguard their decisions was to add other community members to the person's life for planning and acting together. The early (pioneer) social connectors and project staff identified other people in the person's life (family, siblings, friends, neighbours) and engaged further social connectors and community members. They built a circle or group of connections around the person, Adam (Story 8); Daniel (Story 1); Gabriel (Story 3).

The aim of these wider connections or circles of support was to bring a group of allies of a person with intellectual disability together regularly to plan and discuss and solve barriers to community inclusion together. The person was at the centre leading the decisions and directions for change in their life. The project found that circles of support were an effective way to sustain and grow community inclusion. Circles streamlined observation and attentiveness, asking questions like 'What more is possible', and shared problem identification and solving with a small group of like-mined people. Establishing circles of support was a longer term focus for the project, only available to some of the early participants during the 2 years (Section 2.1.5).

4.5.3 Growth in social connector commitment

Many social connectors expressed a strong sense of 'belonging, a like-minded tribe' (Section 2.2.4), which strengthened their commitment to the project. Almost all social connectors expressed their desire to expand their own social networks, make friends and connections with people with and without intellectual disability, becoming involved in local community (Section 3.3.3). They said the relationship with the person and community groups became 'a standard and routine' part of their week, which they enjoyed and benefited from personally. This benefit deepened the engagement and relationships (Section 4.5, Dina's Story 19).

> Because we have common interests, we like going there [to the groups] regularly … that sustains our friendship. The shared group and activity … and the connection between us. We enjoy spending time with each other … just like any friendship, we enjoy each other's company. (Dina, Story 19)

4.5.4 Supporting transitions and change in the connection

The project team provided continuity during changes, transitions and gaps in a social connector relationship. After the connector left due to illness, the project team stepped in to temporarily support Rebecca's ongoing community inclusion with the local library knitting group (Story 12). This temporary role was for several months until a new social connector was matched with Rebecca.

These gaps arose for several reasons. A few people with intellectual disability remained without a social connector match, others waited several months for a suitable connection, and a couple of social connector relationships changed over the 2 years due to personal reasons. The project team continued to meet with the person during the months while they waited for a social connector, exploring a person's interests and preferred community inclusion. The team accompanied Bettina (Story 9) to her preferred community activity, while still seeking to engage a compatible connector. When a social connector was found, the project team slowly reduced their involvement with Bettina's and the group.

4.6 Sustaining collaboration with providers

The project maintained relationships with providers and support staff to contribute to sustaining the person's community inclusion. Providers noted witnessing changes in people's lives, including friendships with social connectors, increased wellbeing and community engagement. They commented on the quality of their interactions with social connectors as respectful and reliable, which motivated them to continue collaboration with the project (Section 2.5).

4.6.1 Sustained communication

The project team kept interested parties informed with updates (emails, photos, videos). They arranged in-person shared planning meetings with everyone included (the person, paid staff, social connector, project team members) as needed, to discuss next steps for the person's social inclusion: based on what was known about the person and their preferences for community inclusion.

> Select [provider] staff now actively support the social connector activities with the person … They have become advocates. Staff help to schedule activities, stand up for participants' opportunities to keep building in more connection and informal relationships. (Project team)

Other elements also sustained collaboration with providers. Sustained communication and problem solving overcame some residual distrust, scepticism and doubts about the project's approach to community inclusion. The benefits built up through time, consistency, transparency and respectful collaboration with the team and social connectors (e.g. seeking shared solutions).

> I can now see the potential … I could see early signs of it working, but *now*, it's … you can't really argue with it anymore. You can actually *see* what happens when it's consistent! (Provider)

> What surprised me … how it's lasted. There was definitely some scepticism at the start, like, this is great, but we weren't sure if [the connections] were really going to last. (Provider)

Demonstrating the effectiveness of the new approach of the project helped sustain the trust with providers. They said they valued the community inclusion approach as breaking with their expectations and introducing 'fresh … outside the box' thinking.

> It's really clarified community inclusion … participation [for us]. (Provider)

> I can now see, they [social connectors] are not helping a person [with disability]. They are doing things they enjoy … they enjoy their time together. This approach is so different from the norm. (Provider)

The project team included providers in regular updates and celebrated inclusion gains as shared achievements. They remained transparent, with open conversations about change, such as when a social connection changed. They invited support staff to workshops and capacity building events to share knowledge and to maintain an 'ongoing dialogue'. This open approach to collaborating with providers resulted with some in changes to provider practices e.g. project/connectors offering ideas about directions services could take sustain a person's preferred community inclusion.

> Being part of [Community for Everyone] has been great for us, some support workers are now trying … they are thinking differently, 'What else is possible?' trying different things. (Provider)

> One person was regularly attending a church service … We suggested a little change, "How about staying for morning tea?", also seeing if there are tasks the person could do to become part of the setting up morning tea … It is those types of conversations and identifying little changes that bring about more meaningful belonging and connections. (Project team)

These interactions with the providers about the person's social relationships contributed to sustaining their community inclusion. These providers began to trust the approach and became actively involved in sustaining a person's community belonging. Gradually shifting some staff and management attitudes, affected some workplace culture change in several of the services (Section 2.5).

> Now I can see the evidence, I can see how [the project] has really enriched our clients' lives! … As a community we need to catch up on the fact that people with disabilities have the same rights … to have friendships … So, yeah, I think there's still a lot more work to be done. (Service manager)

The project team observed how some providers started to put in place the framework of principles for authentic community inclusion in a person's preferred context and diverse and deepening of relationships at those places.

4.6.2 Overcoming challenges to provider commitment

Collaborating with providers was necessary for engagement and to sustain community inclusion. The approach was challenging and time consuming for the project team. The approach took many months to build a shared understanding of the approach, trust and clarity about the social connector role (Section 3.2).

The challenges to maintaining trust and provider commitment arose from risk-averse operational policies (eg, limitations around information of sharing) and manager and support staff turnover and roster changes (week to week), causing loss of information and relational trust. Some providers' processes and work culture were highly risk adverse, which delayed or complicated decisions and approvals (e.g., community activities being subject to risk assessment). For some providers the prioritisation of informal relationships and individualised, meaningful social inclusion were conceptionally novel.

> Some providers, they don't return emails, don't return phone calls, they aren't at the places where a social connector has arranged to meet with them. It is so incredibly disrespectful of people [with disability] and social connectors ... because those relationships aren't always prioritised. (Project team)

> But the staff in the group home, they don't really know what we're doing, or they don't particularly support it, some may think of us as being a bit of a nuisance ... the work that social connectors do – planning, coordinating, phone calls, emails, lining up opportunities - despite all of that, on some days, nothing happens. Repeated experience like these can be frustrating and demoralising for our team and the social connectors. (Project team)

The project team approached collaboration with providers on a 'one-by-one' basis to sustain commitment to the project objectives. This approach meant relational trust with 'each person, with each group home or service, even with each team manager ... we take a ... slightly different approach' (Project team). Sustaining relationships with providers was a core part of the project team's daily work, requiring commitment of time and resources, repeated engagement (in meetings, calls, emails, in person follow up conversations) and skills to maintain decision makers' action. The project team identified allies within the organisations, work teams and providers who understood the project's aims and objectives. These allies and clear values alignment were protective factors to maintain provider commitment.

5. Capacity building processes

Summary of capacity building processes

Capacity building support to people with intellectual disability began with support to decide whether to engage in the project. As the social connections and community inclusion progressed, the project team handed most of the capacity building to the social connector.

Capacity building with the social connectors and community members was relational and became more flexible as the project progressed. Options included training sessions, workshops, individual support, group meetings.

Peer leaders and pioneer social connectors shared their experience through the capacity building and lead decisions about the project. The project advisory group offered expert advice, especially to overcome challenges to engagement and sustainability.

The project conducted capacity building activities for the people with intellectual disability, social connectors and community members. These processes were support for the social connection relationships, workshops, peer leaders and governance for the project.

5.1 Support for social connection relationships

5.1.1 Capacity building support to people with intellectual disability

The project walked alongside the person, social connector and provider to support capacity of the person to express their choice and interests in the connection and to identify their preferred community places and activities. Building the person's capacity to express their choice to participate in the project was important during the engagement (Section 3.1), and while establishing a quality relationship with the connector, ensuring the pair's mutual interests and compatibility (Section 4.2).

> People will be doing lots of things for the first time and this is really big. Getting in a lift, catching a train, going out for dinner for the first time – all first time community experiences. This is really big, we need to pay attention to how it impacts on people, how the person responds … change can be upsetting. (Peer leader)

Early stage focus

Throughout the early stages of the relationship building the project team were regularly present when person and connectors met, supporting the person's choices about the relationship and community activities. Technology, video and existing resources made information accessible to the person.

> We volunteer fortnightly Sundays at the wetlands. We are learning about reptiles and birds. Tom is very enthusiastic about going there. I make sure we prepare for our outings together … scaffolding with social stories, photos, preparing a 'visual routine' for the day … Tom feels in control, he knows what's going to happen, and that he can change his mind. (Social connector)

Handing over responsibility

Gradually the project handed responsibility for that capacity to the person and connector when they were confident. The project remained involved in the background through mentorship and during changes (e.g., such as visiting unfamiliar, further away places or overnight stays; Adam Story 8; James Story 10). The project team remained involved in planning meetings (between person, connector, provider, project staff), assisted with administrative tasks or communication with decision makers (e.g., community group management, volunteering permits).

> [The project team] helped to remove a lot of barriers that come with arranging services and paid supports. It also happens because the [Social Connector's] sole focus is Murray … His approach is, "Righto, what can we do for Murray?" and he just gets it done … Murray likes telling everyone about … volunteering and he's made more connections at church. And it just gives him a really positive story to tell … It's creating memories and connection and purpose. (Provider)

5.1.2 Support to social connectors

The project developed a range of supports and capacity building opportunities for social connectors and community members engaged or interested in the project.

Tailoring the support

Support to social connectors included informal mentorship (e.g., accompanying the person and connector on outings) and individual conversations (in person and phone calls); structured regular monthly meetings (community of practice) for connectors and project team members to exchange ideas; 'bite-size' lunch and learn sessions (offering information, evidence around a particular topic, such as supporting decision making); and a formal 4 half-day in person training for social connectors. Providing smaller,

incremental approach to learning, skills and confidence building with social connectors was another way to support connectors.

The longer training module was for community members and connectors to gain awareness of relevant topics (history of disability, de-institutionalisation movement, disability models, supported decision making) and gain practical skills relevant to the social connector role. An important component was that Peer Leaders co-delivered the trainings and monthly meet-ups, sharing their personal experiences and insights. Peer Leaders co-designed and co-presented training, sharing personal experiences and insights.

> Peer leadership is important to show how we are able to speak up and share our life experience. Educating the social connectors how to work with people with disability is important. (Peer leader)

A way the project tailored the training for social connectors in the first year was to remove the requirement to complete the 4 half day connector training before connecting with a person. Instead, connectors could do the training in smaller blocks of time or as required. This change occurred because not all social connectors were engaged at the same time and the training could be a barrier for some social connectors to become involved (Section 3.3).

Diverse options and learning from lived experience

The diverse capacity building meant social connectors and community members could increase their awareness and build skills and confidence gradually. They had repeated learning opportunities, learning from and through lived experience (peer leaders and pioneer social connectors), storytelling and personalised tailored mentorship and support specific to their needs.

> During the monthly meetings, we had a discussion with the other connectors and the Peer Leaders, I realised … in the future, I can step back even more, support the person's independence, by encouraging them to do more of their own … in the group. (Social connector)

Structured, relational support based in community development

The project team said the relationally structured approach to capacity building based in community development was successful for social connectors and community members to gain information and develop skills. The approach generated a sense of belonging and purpose from the support activities in the project, especially through the monthly meet-ups.

> Teamwork has been crucial. We lean on each other, we share how we feel, we challenge and support each other [in the monthly meet ups]. It keeps us going … when we face challenges. (Social connector)

5.2 Leadership of peers with lived expertise

Peer leaders in the project were central to the governance and delivery of the project, ensuring Community for Everyone remained accountable and authentic to the interests and perspectives of people with intellectual disability.

The four peer leaders were selected based on the of their lived experience and expertise with deinstitutionalisation. Peer leaders also had an interest in developing leadership skills or had existing leadership experience, delivering workshops and co-design to various audiences.

> I provide mentoring and make everything inclusive for people with intellectual disability […]. As a person living with disability, I have the power, I have the knowledge, I have lived experience to make a change for other people. (Peer leader)

The project took a person centred, trauma informed approach to peer leadership development. Opportunities were tailored to each peer leader's interests, lived experience and strengths, with support provided to protect wellbeing, safety and personal integrity when sharing lived experience.

> We apply a trauma informed approach to codesign, we consider who needs to share what story, is it safe for them to do. Really thoughtful about who shares what. We consider the circumstances and the topics, avoid unnecessary repetition of stories. (Project team)

Peer leaders were involved and held leadership roles across project activities and decisions – from governance, design of the project at the outset, presentations to various audiences (community groups, providers, academic forums, radio interviews), the design and delivery of workshops, training materials to social connectors, facilitation of monthly meet ups. The project team considered this authentic and complete involvement of peer leaders in the project was a determining success factor in the project. Peer leadership ensured the project was authentic and stayed relevant, was informed by decisions of people with relevant expertise, the project demonstrated or 'role modelled' the inclusion of people with intellectual disability in social action that matter to them.

Peer leadership was central to engaging social connectors, providers and people with intellectual disability in the project, enabling community members to form 'emotional engagement/links' during community engagement sessions (3.3.1). Peer leaders were instrumental in building capacity, they were repeatedly called upon for their knowledge and expertise by connectors and other community members (e.g., resolving questions, seeking advice).

> I liked sharing my story and meeting new people. I also like it when people ask me questions and listen to what I have to say. It is important because I want everyone in institutions to have the opportunities to live the way they want in the community. (Peer leader)

Developing and expanding peer leadership in the project greatly increased personal growth and leadership capacity of the four peer leaders. Examples included confidence and skills to speak and present in public, advocate for self and others, social confidence and making friendships, feeling proud to be involved in driving social change, and feeling respected. Peer leaders were listened to and highly valued for their lived experience and expertise. These outcome were achieved due to a range of personalised support and preparation to equip peer leaders with the skills to make contributions to the project governance decisions, including be involved in the project's delivery.

> In the past I used to be shy, I avoided public speaking and presenting; now, I like to be part of the meetings, I speak up … Teaching the social connectors how to work with people with disability is important … I like hearing my experience and story is useful to others. (Peer leader)

> I influence our own knowledge … Sharing stories is a very, very powerful way of doing that … I feel more confident about helping others. It's about [challenging] people to think differently about challenging stereotypes … And every day, we are making new, new connections every single day. (Peer leader)

5.3 Project advisory group

The project advisory group was a shared activity of both organisations. The group met quarterly to advise the project governance and contribute subject matter expertise (Section 1). The group met online, allowing experts and leaders to come together from different perspectives to provide guidance to the project. The group involved peers and academics, the diversity of perspectives and knowledge was used to inform the project and problem-solve around barriers (e.g. engagement of people, providers and social connectors).

> The project is grounded in every piece of available research and experience, and the participants and leaders have extensive experience about what it takes, and what is involved in creating community connections and beyond. (Project advisory group member).

The diversity of knowledges meant that barriers or problems faced by the project were discussed and reviewed from multiple perspectives, allowing solutions to be generated. One example of a change that derived from the PAG was a recommendation to shift from upfront training to a more flexible, 'in-time learning' approach for social connectors. This approach allowed connectors to engage at their own pace, emphasised learning as a shared process, and provided opportunities to participate in different ways, such as first attending social gatherings to see if the project was a good fit.

Another example of PAG advice was clarifying the role of the Public Guardian in project participation. The PAG advised the project team to clarify that, unless a person has an access order, the Public Guardian does not consent to or deny a person's involvement. This guidance helped shift decision-making power closer to the person and assisted group home providers to take greater ownership of their role in facilitating participation, once they understood that each person had the right to be involved in the project.

The Project Advisory Group membership also ensured that the Board and management of the organisations understood and supported the project. Members of the PAG with subject matter expertise facilitated workshops such as the workshop 'Listening to people rarely heard' which was open to connectors, providers and community members.

6. Lessons and future directions

Community for Everyone demonstrated that community inclusion and social belonging is possible for profoundly socially isolated people with intellectual disability who previously had limited opportunities to experience being a part of their communities (Section 1). People became known and were acknowledged by others in their local communities (Section 2). These outcomes were achieved through a personalised social connection that grew to include friendships with community members beyond paid support and peers with disability.

> Organic social connections are being made, beyond the activities the person does together with the connector … People are connecting to their culture, language and identify, faith and spiritual groups. These are significant and meaningful stepping stones for genuine connections, for people to feel like they truly belong in their communities. (Project advisory group member)

These outcomes required purposeful and skilled work over time. This included getting to know the person; understanding their communication, preferences, interests and gifts; identifying opportunities for connection; working with providers and community organisations; supporting Social Connectors and community members; and adjusting support as relationships developed. Paid coordination and facilitation supported the development of these relationships. As connections developed, paid staff and the project team could step back, providing more opportunity for direct relationships between the person and other community members.

This type of community-building is consistent with policy expectations in current and forthcoming policy (ADS, NDIS), where we anticipate people with intellectual disability take their place in local communities. This project shows that this will not happen for this group without purposeful, careful, skilled support. It needs skilled coordination and facilitation to bring to life the community willingness. These social connector relationships would not happen or be sustained without the paid support to facilitate them.

This final Section of the report summarises the key elements of the Community for Everyone approach and discusses future directions for similar projects about people who are profoundly socially isolated building and sustaining relationships and community inclusion outcomes.

6.1 Elements of the approach

The objective of Community for Everyone was to address the impact of institutionalisation on profound social isolation of some people with intellectual disability (Section 1). The project generated evidence about how social networks and community belonging could be achieved through connecting the person with intellectual disability and the social connectors, supporting community development within the person's preferred communities and facilitating cultural change in organisations and communities that knew the person.

Core elements included,

- Engaging with people with intellectual disability through support providers at the places where people live and spend their days
- Slow and intentional getting to know the person to understand their interests and preferences for social inclusion, including by spending time in the person's home, learning about things that matter to them, and by speaking with people who know the person well
- Engaging community members, social connectors, allies, friends and family of people with intellectual disability to build readiness for connection
- Connecting a person with social connectors (unpaid community member/s) who share similar interests and live close by
- Providing person-centred decision support and intentional, personalised planning with the person to try novel community experiences that match their interests
- Building capacity of the person and social connectors to develop relationships and grow the conditions for inclusion in the person's preferred community contexts (e.g. expand opportunities for connections with other community members)
- Gradually strengthening a person's community belonging through 'becoming known' by others; by regularly attending the same places, times and community groups, so the person can develop deeper relationships and form new connections
- Working together to resolve challenges and manage change
- Developing and sustaining a collaborative approach and buy-in with providers who know the person

The approach changed over time, as the project team and social connectors learned more about each person, new opportunities emerged. The Community for Everyone team continued to ask, 'What more is possible?' as interpersonal connections between the person and social connectors developed.

6.2 Lessons for project sustainability

Lessons for sustainability of similar projects are summarised at the beginning of each of the sections above and repeated here. The lessons also raise useful questions about how the elements and approach fit with the way supports work now and, in the future, such as Foundational Supports and NDIS funded services. That is, what can be learned from the positive outcomes from this approach (Section 2) that could be applicable to other forms of informal and formal support. For example, how could this approach be integrated with good practice in schools, workplaces and intellectual disability services.

Engagement in the project

Engagement with people with intellectual disability was through the organisations and places where people were likely to be socially isolated. This required gaining provider and decision makers' trust through repeated persistent contact, then meeting the person many times to gain their informed consent or assent to participate.

Engagement with service providers where people lived and spent their days built from existing contacts or established new contacts. Both approaches took time to build trust, often over many months, through consistent, relational and respectful engagement to demonstrate the potential of the approach. Collaboration with providers remained important throughout the project. Group home managers and support staff influenced participants' access to transport, local groups and community settings, changes to routines, and the opportunities available for new relationships to develop. Identifying staff within services who understood and supported the approach assisted with resolving barriers and maintaining involvement.

Engagement with social connectors was through wide promotion in the local community, followed by personal discussions. Another approach was personalised engagement by attending places with the person to strengthen possible connections. The expectations of a social connector became flexible about time, commitment and training to respond to social connectors' capacity and motivations.

Connecting and sustaining relationships

Getting to know the person required prolonged deep listening, using ways to support their expression and choice and identifying their existing connections, from which to make personalised iterative plans for inclusion.

Connecting between the person and social connector required planning for compatibility, preference, and building familiarity and trust by spending regular times together in their preferred places around shared interests.

Building the relationship and community inclusion required conditions that were respectful and personalised, consistent and predictable to everyone involved, built shared interests and were able to rely on support from the project team.

Sustaining these connections required actively building the conditions for inclusion that would extend the person's connections and network. These conditions also supported the social connector's commitment. The project team supported any changes in these connections. Regular and predictable contact supported familiarity and trust. The 'same time, same place, same people' approach increased opportunities for participants and other community members to become familiar with one another. Over time, some participants moved from attending a group or place to being recognised, known and contributing. In some instances, other community members noticed and responded when the person was absent.

Work continued beyond establishing the initial connection with a Social Connector. The project team and Social Connectors identified other people around the participant with whom relationships might develop, supported opportunities for contribution and membership, strengthened existing connections and, for some participants, developed Circles of Support. The question 'what more is possible?' was used to consider how an initial connection could lead to a wider network of relationships. This work required persistence. Project staff frequently worked with providers and community members to address established routines, practical barriers and expectations about what was possible for participants who had experienced long periods of social isolation.

Sustaining collaboration with providers was critical to the success of approach and time consuming. It required sustained communication and problem solving to demonstrate the benefits of the approach. The project team found allies to maintain the commitment.

Capacity building processes

Capacity building occurred with participants, Social Connectors, community members and service providers throughout the project.

For people with intellectual disability, this began with support to understand and decide whether to participate. As connections developed, support focused on expressing preferences and choices, trying new experiences, developing familiarity with people and places, and increasing opportunities for direct relationships with other community members. Over time, much of this support shifted from the project team to the Social Connector, who had developed greater knowledge of the person and could support further connections within the community.

Capacity building with Social Connectors was ongoing and responsive to the relationship and circumstances of each person. It included initial training, workshops, individual mentoring, group meetings, reflection and practical problem-solving. The approach became more flexible over the course of the project, with support provided when issues or opportunities arose rather than relying on a fixed training program.

Social Connectors also developed capacity within the communities they were connecting people to. This included introducing the person, sharing relevant knowledge about communication and support, encouraging direct interaction, and supporting community members to become more confident in knowing and including the person. As familiarity and relationships developed, less facilitation was required.

Peer leadership was an important part of capacity building. Peer leaders and pioneer Social Connectors brought lived and practice experience to training, shared what they had learned through the project and contributed to project decisions. The Project Advisory Group provided additional expertise and advice, particularly where the project encountered barriers to engagement or sustainability.

The project also identified a need to build the capacity of paid services. Group home staff, support workers, coordinators and managers can all act as connectors by understanding a person's interests and preferences, identifying opportunities for connection, making introductions, noticing emerging relationships and supporting direct contact with community members. This requires staff to see community connection and relationship-building as part of their role, rather than equating community participation with attendance at activities.

For paid staff and Social Connectors alike, the work involved knowing when support was needed and when to step back. The aim was to use support to extend the person's relationships and community connections, while allowing those relationships to become increasingly direct and less reliant on facilitation.

Sustaining relationships and community belonging

Sustainability can also be considered in terms of what remains in the person's life after project involvement reduces or ends. Relevant outcomes include whether relationships continue, whether other people initiate contact, whether the person is known within local groups, whether their absence is noticed, whether their social network has increased, and whether they have people in their life who are not paid to be there.

The Community for Everyone evaluation findings are relevant to Foundational Supports, NDIS-funded services and other settings including schools and workplaces. Although, the Community for Everyone approach focused on freely given relationships, formal

(paid support) can play a role in creating meaningful and personalised community inclusion and belonging for people with disability with profound social isolation. Formal supports can contribute to the development of relationships by identifying opportunities, making introductions, addressing barriers and supporting initial connections. As relationships develop, paid support can step back to allow greater direct contact, reciprocity and independence.

Community for Everyone is evidence of the work required to move from **community presence to community belonging**, and of the role that both paid supports and community members can play in developing and sustaining relationships for people experiencing profound social isolation.

6.3 Implications for policy and practice

The need to build social relationships for people with intellectual disability who experience social isolation has been identified as a national priority. The *Diversity, dignity, equity and best practice: a framework for supported decision-making* (Bigby et al., 2023), commissioned by the Disability Royal Commission (DRC), identified the importance of informal supporters to supported decision-making and the limited evidence about how social connections can be developed for people who do not have strong family or informal relationships.

The DRC recommended strategies to build social connections for socially isolated people with intellectual disability to be a priority investment in supported decision-making programs and initiatives. It recommended research to understand how social connections can be built for people without existing strong family or informal relationships (Recommendation 10.1), and demonstration programs to build and evaluate lasting and robust social networks (Recommendation 10.2).

The Community for Everyone project responded directly to this gap. The project generated evidence about the practices to develop relationships and community belonging for people experiencing profound social isolation, including people who have lived in institutional and segregated settings.

Recognising profound social isolation

The findings indicate a need for disability policy and services to identify and respond to profound social isolation. Having paid support, participating in community activities or regularly leaving home does not necessarily indicate that a person has meaningful relationships or belongs in their community.

Assessment and planning processes could consider who is in the person's life, the nature of these relationships, whether they include people not paid to be there, relationships that were lost or could be strengthened, and the person's preferences for friendship, connection and community life. Where profound social isolation is identified, building relationships and informal networks could be an explicit area of practice and support.

Measures of social inclusion extend beyond attendance and participation. Relevant outcomes include whether the person is known by others, has reciprocal relationships, contributes to a group or community, has contact with people outside paid services, and is noticed or missed when absent.

Recognising the work required to build relationships

The project found that relationships did not develop through community participation alone. They required skilled work over time: getting to know the person and their communication and preferences; identifying interests, gifts and potential contribution; finding places where people with shared interests meet regularly; making introductions; developing relationships with community organisations; supporting community members; addressing barriers with providers; and following emerging connections.

Much of this work occurs outside direct face-to-face support. It includes community mapping, relationship-building, planning, approaching groups and individuals, mentoring, follow-up and coordination. Funding arrangements that recognise only direct support risk ignoring the work required to establish and sustain informal relationships.

Foundational Supports and NDIS-funded services could resource this community-building and relational work where people experience significant social isolation.

Role of formal support

Formal services have an important role in building social connection. This role extends beyond taking people to activities in the community. Group home staff, support workers, coordinators and managers can all act as connectors. This involves knowing the person well, identifying interests and existing connections, finding places where people with shared interests meet regularly, making introductions, supporting contribution, noticing emerging relationships and following opportunities for these relationships to develop.

This requires a sophisticated measure of good community support. The question is

more than where did the person go and what did they do, but also who did they meet, who knows them, what did they contribute, and what relationship might develop.

Paid support needs to change as unpaid relationships develop. Staff may initially have an active role in making introductions, supporting communication and building confidence. Over time, paid staff need to recognise when their presence can change and step back to create space for direct relationships between the person and other community members.

Building community capacity

The findings also have implications beyond disability services. Relationships develop within neighbourhoods, clubs, workplaces, sporting and recreation groups, faith communities, cultural organisations and other local settings.

Community for Everyone found considerable willingness among community members to connect when people were approached personally and given information and support. Investment is needed to support the capacity of communities to recognise, invite and value people's contribution, alongside investment in a person's support.

This type of work includes supporting local organisations to understand inclusion, developing partnerships between disability and mainstream community organisations, and strengthening community development approaches that connect people through shared interests, contribution and local relationships. Community for Everyone did this through a dual focus on the interests of a person and the potential community opportunities to respond to that interest.

Social relationships and supported decision-making

The findings also reinforce the relationship between social connection and supported decision-making identified by Bigby et al. (2023). People who have few or no informal relationships may have few people who know them well enough to know their communication, understand their history and preferences, or support their will and preferences in decisions affecting their lives.

Several project experiences demonstrated how sustained relationships increased other people's knowledge of the person's communication, preferences and responses. Developing informal relationships and Circles of Support has implications beyond social inclusion. These relationships can increase the number of trusted people who know the person well and can contribute to supporting their autonomy and decision-making.

Future policy and practice

Contemporary research evidence and the Community for Everyone findings suggest that personalised relationship building is core to people's wellbeing and community belonging. Building meaningful relationships can be measured and could find greater recognition across disability policy and practice, including Foundational Supports and NDIS-funded services. The approach also has relevance within other mainstream settings in schools, workplaces and services that support people with intellectual disability.

Investment could recognise both sides of the work: skilled support to a person to create opportunities for connection, and community development that increases the capacity of local people and organisations to form relationships with that person and potentially other people with intellectual disability.

Community for Everyone demonstrated the difference between being present in community and belonging within it. Participants became known, developed reciprocal relationships, contributed to local groups and were noticed when they were absent. These outcomes provide practical indicators of community belonging that extend beyond measures of participation and service use.

These relationships did not develop by chance. Skilled, paid coordination and facilitation was required to establish the conditions for connection. The purpose of this work was not to keep paid support at the centre. As relationships developed, paid support could step back, creating greater opportunity for direct, reciprocal and enduring relationships between people with intellectual disability and other members of their communities.

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Appendix A Stories of Change

All names are alias to protect privacy.

Story 1: Daniel finding community inclusion at parkrun

Daniel's story is told from the perspective of social connectors and community members in his life

Daniel has many interests, especially chatting with people, collecting magazines, and going for walks. The CfE project team had introduced Daniel to the local parkrun, a friendly community event for people of all ages. Daniel started out volunteering as a "park walker," encouraging other participants on the track. Over time, parkrun became a place where Daniel could meet people, build relationships and join in the community.

Dina, said, "I invited one of my friends to get involved, and a ripple effect was created from there—now there's a team of five of us [social connectors] who come together each week to go to parkrun, and we tag-team giving Daniel a lift. This routine has made it easy for him to attend and feel supported".

Since starting at parkrun, I've noticed Daniel growing in confidence. He gets dressed in his hi-vis vest, is ready to jump in the car. Going to the same event week after week has helped Daniel feel comfortable, get to know people, learn their names, and chat more easily. This repetition and routine have made it easy for him to become a familiar and a recognised part of the community.

A Circle member, Dot reflected:
"What works really well is that we go to the same event, same day, same time, with the same people—just that repetition and routine works really well. My son Terry loves it; he enjoys racing Daniel, and they've become part of each other's lives. Taking the time to celebrate the little things, like birthdays, also works really well for Daniel and for all of us to connect with each other more."

"A special moment for everyone was when Daniel turned 60. It was pouring with rain, nevertheless, we all gathered at parkrun with our umbrellas, everyone showed up, all the runners that day came to celebrate. We arranged to bring a birthday cake and a personal photo album for Daniel; we sang happy birthday and had cake together. The parkrun organisers gave him a high-vis volunteer vest with his name and "park walker" embroidered on it, which Daniel proudly wears every week. Seeing him so proud and happy that day really showed me how much being part of this community matters to Daniel!" (Circle member)

Group home provider said: “Daniel is the centre of attention at parkrun; he absolutely relishes in that connection he shares with other runners and attendees; he takes great pride in being part of that group.”

Longitudinal observations from social connector

Daniel has attended parkrun most Saturdays for over 1.5 years. The number of people who know Daniel by his name, that interact and speak with Daniel has steadily grown to around 20 people. It is a large group of community members. Daniel looks forward to seeing who's there each weekend, who couldn’t attend and why. He loves a good bit of gossip!

We have set up a WhatsApp chat with friends in Daniel’s life to help everyone stay connected and organised each week. We use it to coordinate practical things like lifts, share updates about our own lives, and keep in touch about what Daniel is up to and enjoying.

What stands out is how much Daniel is included, part of and welcomed in the community, how much other people think of him and show their interest in his life. For example, people will bring magazines and calendars Daniel enjoys reading; make thoughtful hand-written cards or gifts for his birthday; the group also organised another birthday cake and party this year; the guys from the sausage stand know his order, many new and existing connections will take the time to greet Daniel, have a laugh and chat.

Daniel’s community belonging could be seen when he missed three Saturdays in a row. Several parkrun directors and community members contacted the social connector and CfE team to ask where Daniel was and whether he was ok. Daniel had been unwell, and on two occasions the social connectors were unavailable to pick him up. The concern shown by others suggested that Daniel had become known, missed, and valued within the community.

A next step in deepening Daniel’s community belonging may be for relationships within the parkrun community to strengthen further, with community members taking more active roles in supporting his participation, such as offering transport when needed.

The main challenges for supporting and connecting with Daniel remains communication, like having to ring a landline to confirm pick-up. The social connectors have organised an iPad for Daniel to facilitate communication with him more easily.

One of the main challenges in staying connected with Daniel has been communication, including the need to call a landline to confirm plans and transport arrangements. To

make communication easier and support Daniel's growing independence, the Social Connectors recently organised an iPad for him. Daniel is still learning how to use it, but the aim is to make it easier to stay in touch and support his participation at parkrun, including potentially expanding his volunteering role as the official photographer.

Story 2: Cornelia explores new interests at home and outside

Collated from stories told from Cornelia's perspective:

My name is Cornelia, I became part of Community for Everyone 2 years ago. My lifelong dream has been to get a school certificate. Also I want to be more confident at painting, playing an instrument, and going out sometimes.

It is important to me that I live alone in my own home. I enjoy being in control of my time and space but still would be nice to do some things in the community. When *Community for Everyone* asked me if I want to connect with Cathy, a social connector, I agreed … I wanted to spend time with someone I can trust. Enjoy a good time doing art and other things together.

Once Cathy came into my life, we started exploring different art forms, drawing and painting. Cathy bought canvasses and paint for me. Later we started singing and now I am learning to play an instrument. My idea had been to play guitar, but when that was too large for me to hold, Cathy helped me choose to play the ukelele instead. These are all things I always thought about doing, but I didn't know how to start on my own. Being part of Community for Everyone, I also started studying at Tafe online. I was worried about going to Tafe so Cathy helped set up my studies so I can participate with other people in my course from home.

Cathy and I enjoy our time together, she comes over once a fortnight, the first few months we only met at my home. Here, I feel safe, I know where to find everything I need. After a few months getting to know each other, I felt I could trust Cathy, she is easy to talk to, we laugh together, she respects me and listens.

After five months regularly meeting up, Cathy suggested we could travel by train to the Central Coast. This was an important place for me. Going to the Entrance made me feel more confident. I enjoyed taking the train, seeing the landscape change, visiting a new place – it made me feel proud of myself.

Cathy and I keep spending time together we meet at my place, we do the TAFE class together, and some days, when I feel confident, we also go out … for short walks, we

drive to the beach, get breakfast in a café. I enjoy spending time with Cathy, I wish we had more time, it can be hard finding a time that works for both of us.

Cathy, the social connector, added:

*"*Since becoming part of the project, Cornelia's world has expanded … Each time we go out into the community, it feels like a small but significant step. I have seen Cornelia's confidence grow, I am aware this is closely linked to the trust we have developed. Connection and trust have brought us closer together. It also means Cornelia would like to spend more time together, which can be difficult due to my work and other commitments. Navigating our relationships requires clear and honest communication."

"I see changes … a supportive and consistent relationship has positively impacted Cornelia's wellbeing. When she leaves home, she is more open to speaking to neighbours, she greets people on the street, initiates a conversation. It shows growing confidence and openness to connect with people around her."

Story 3: Gabriel a member of the Landcare group

Gabriel's story is collated from interviews with social connectors, project staff and a family member

Gabriel is passionate about meeting other people, being out in nature and staying active. Gina, the social connector, recently moved to the area and was seeking opportunities for getting involved locally and making new friends.

Gina said, When Gabriel and I met we quickly worked out we both had a love for nature. Also, we got on well. It seemed natural for us to start volunteering with the Landcare group. The question we kept asking is, 'What more is possible?'

In early 2025, when Gabriel's birthday came around, nearly the entire Landcare group came to celebrate. Twelve new friends—people who didn't know Gabriel a year earlier—turned up to mark the occasion. A month later the group held another celebration with a cake and a special, personalised gift.

Other volunteers in the Landcare group commented, "We are so happy that Gabriel has chosen our group … we are learning the principles of caring for the land … Gabriel just gets in and joins the weeding group. He loves being surrounded by nature … We are happy we can be part of his journey". (Landcare member)

The project staff emphasised, "Gabriel's contributions are *not just limited* to his work

on the land. His infectious sense of humour, his warmth, and his genuine interest in others have made him a valued member of the group. The shared contributions from everyone foster mutual respect and connection. Each person's unique gifts combine to create something greater than the sum of its parts". (Project team)

Gabriel's sister, Denise, added, "Gabriel is absolutely coming into his own. There are parts of his personality that must have been submerged for so long because he wasn't given the opportunity to be the full person he is. It's quite amazing to see. He now knows people care for him — that's why he wants to go. He talks about it before he goes and again afterward, really coming alive when he shares what he's done. It's brilliant. This is what can happen when people have real friends."

"We've built a Circle of Support around Gabriel — a small group of people who care about him and want to see him thrive. We meet regularly to plan and stay focused on the steps needed to build his social networks and increase his control over his life".

Story 4: Robert finds new connections through music

Told by Rita, Social Connector

When I first joined the project … I knew I wanted to be part of it. I wasn't sure what to expect, but it turned out to be one of the best decisions I've made! I am connected with Robert and we meet weekly. Robert lives in a group home with four other men. Before this, most of Robert's relationships were with paid staff, and he didn't have many chances to really be part of his local community. We knew he loved music and people, so we mapped out some local opportunities and found a local Saturday morning ukulele group that looked fun, relaxed and welcoming.

From the very first time Robert went to the Saturday group he was greeted with open arms. He brought his huge smile and infectious laugh — and before long, everyone in the group knew him by name. Each week, he walks in grinning. More people make a point of saying hello and spending time with Robert. It's fantastic to watch him light up the room.

On Saturday mornings, Robert gets all dressed up and the staff tell me it's his favourite thing to do all week. On the drive there and back, we sing, laugh and tell jokes … It's just such a joyful part of the week for both of us … It's something I really look forward to as well. It's given me purpose and connection.

Over time, I've seen such a change in Robert, he is more relaxed, confident and

connected with other people. He walks into the room proudly, greets people, joins in with jokes, and plays his ukulele.

Being consistent has really helped — we applied: 'Same group, same people, same time each week' as a principle. That routine appears to help Robert feel safe and excited; it gives him something to look forward to.

After several months, the group home staff are getting on board too. At first, it was a bit of a challenge. Some staff have worked in institutional settings for a long time and those habits and mindsets can be hard to shift. There were moments I had to gently push back — to make sure Robert was dressed up for his outing, that he could bring a proper morning tea and that people understood this wasn't just another "program." This was Roberts' community!

But the change has been worth it. These days, when I walk into the house, his morning tea is ready and he's looking sharp — not like he's just about to do gardening! He looks proud, like a man heading out to do something that really matters to him.

For me, this experience has been life-giving too. I feel valued. I feel like I'm part of something that matters. I've found my people in this group of social connectors— bright, opinionated folks who care about making the world a better place.

Robert now has real community membership in an ordinary group. He's no longer just someone being taken somewhere — he *belongs*. And that's what the Community for Everyone project is about.

Story 5: Theo and Jimmy develop familiarity with each other

Theo's story is told by Jimmy (social connector)

We had little information about Theo. It was suggested that Theo is a man with a passion for speed, action movies and superheroes. Theo communicates informally with gestures. He is not easily understood by people who do not know him well. When I met Theo, his main connections were with two housemates he lives with and paid support.

In the beginning, I started spending more time with Theo at the day program he attends with others. I really wanted to get to know Theo better, I was genuinely interested. We would spend most Friday afternoons together. We would sit together do puzzles, play games. Sometimes I would observe, just be present and listen.

Each time, I got to know Theo better, each time I learnt something new. Over several

months now, I discovered an amazing person who enjoys trying out new activities and who participates when he is included in a group in a meaningful way.

After the first few months, getting to know each other only at the day centre, we started attending a local community garden. I used photos to show Theo the new places we would explore, the things that he could see and do there.

At the local gardens, we find things we enjoy … being surrounded by nature. We smell plants, explore textures, such as sensations of plants, which are soft and smooth to bring about calm and pleasure … The garden is also a place where we walk together, side by side, Theo takes the lead, he sets the pace. Quiet time together observing and being outdoors.

We were also invited to plant small strawberry plants. At first, Theo was only observing watching me. Then next thing, he decided to try it out himself.

It's been a few months now that we spend time at the community garden. I feel Theo feels safe and accepted with me and the other community members who are at the garden. Some days he waves and smiles when he sees me coming to the day program. It means a lot to me; it is a sign of growing trust and a connection between us.

Story 6: Murray and Alfred getting to know each other

Murray is in his 60s; most of his life he lived in institutions. Since the introduction of the NDIS, Murray was supported move into a group home. Murray has legal orders that manage the activities he can engage in. Once everyone was on board, (including providers and legal guardians), the project introduced Murray and Alfred, who share a passion for nature and the outdoors.

Murray said he wanted to become part of the project to fulfill his "lifelong dream" of gardening or volunteering. "I wanted to do something more interesting everyday than just filling in colours". Also, "I wanted to meet new people … to be my friend". (Murray)

After hearing about the project, one senior support staff said, "I thought [the project] was a really good opportunity for Murray to expand his social networks, make connections outside. I could see, Murray was clearly interested, when I asked him. So, together, we decided to give it a go." (Provider)

Alfred, the social connector said, "We started getting around and building trust. Me turning up, consistently … Initially, of course, it was important that we 'just got on' with

each other. I took time to learn about and understand what Murray likes doing and vice versa. We started with going for short walks [around the area where Murray lives]. We observed animals and birds, once we saw an echidna. Those quiet catch ups were good, we were clearly getting on well. It built familiarity between us."

Over six months, Murray and Alfred got to know each other, going for short walks nearby, to regularly doing activities together and visiting places further afield in the community.

Story 7: Murray finds community inclusion

Murray: "My dream was to do gardening or volunteering". In early-2025, Alfred (social connector) and project staff spent several months speaking to Murray and finding 'the right' group for Murray to become part of.

First, they approached a nature conservation group. Phone calls went unanswered and attempts to visit in person weren't successful. The team held off emailing because they suspected a written request would make it easier for the group to decline. Eventually, with no other way to make contact, they sent an email. Management responded saying they could not accommodate a volunteer who required line-of-sight supervision. "It was a firm no and a disappointment. We tried for so long. We understood we had to start with a more casual, less formal "application"."

"Together with Murray we reviewed what went wrong and changed course. We started with someone more junior in a second [volunteering] organisation. There Murray found someone who was open to the idea of community inclusion. Shortly after, Murray and Alfred started visiting the gardening group together, casually at first, rather than as "dedicated volunteers". "Over a few weeks, the volunteers and organisers built trust with Murray and Alfred. We found that once other members got to know Murray first-hand, they were welcoming and supportive." (Project staff).

After about six months of actively searching for the right group, Murray and Alfred finally got to "attend a local group, weeding and caring for country weekly as part of a group of other volunteers".

Murray and Alfred emphasised, "We love our group, we have morning tea every time we go, sit around and chat. It is important to remember people's names, so the group gets to know us, too. We enjoy each other's company".

Murray said, "the changes [for me] are a lot … when Alfred came along, I got to know

him like a friend. Now, I am getting to know a lot of new people [in the gardening group] and friends, it makes me happy."

Story 8: Adam and Alfred building a friendship

Adam's story is told by project staff

Adam loves nature and listening to music. He is a quiet man and doesn't say much. Adam lives in a group home with four other people with intellectual disability. Alfred is a community connector with Hunter Circles. Alfred first got involved in 2022, after attending a training workshop, Adam and Alfred were connected. They have been meeting up almost weekly over 3.5 years.

From March 2023, Alfred started visiting Adam every week. At first, he spent most of his time inside the group home. He followed Adam's pace and kept showing up at the same time every week.

By May, a support worker suggested that Alfred and Adam go for a walk around the neighbourhood. That became their regular routine. Alfred also mentioned to the house manager that one day he'd like to take Adam out in his car. The house manager told him this wasn't allowed under their policy — if Adam went out in a car, it would have to be one of the staff driving.

The staff weren't sure yet; they needed to learn to trust Alfred. Over months, Alfred kept coming back every week and also built relationships with the team at the group home, demonstrating his commitment and reliability. In October 2023, after 7 months of weekly visits, the house manager agreed that Adam could go out with Alfred in his car.

From there, Alfred and Adam's friendship really grew. They went on bushwalks together, listened to live music, and Alfred introduced Adam to his friend Margaret to help him grow his social network. They all started playing music together at Alfred's home and started forming the foundations of a Circle of Support.

In 2024 was a turning point in Alfred and Adam's friendship. Together they travelled overnight to the Blue Mountains to celebrate Adam's 63rd birthday. A year later the pair returned to the Blue Mountains for Adam's 64th birthday — this time all of Adam's family attended. It was the first time Adam was together with all of his family since he had moved into the Stockton Centre at 14 years of age, 50 years ago. This was a very meaningful reconnection moment for Adam and everyone else involved.

Alfred said, "Going to the Blue Mountains overnight was a little bit daunting initially, because we had not been anywhere on an overnight trip together, I didn't know how Adam and I would react in that situation. It turned out to be the greatest experience I've ever had. … We had a wonderful time at the BBQ lunch …When Adam blew out the candles you could see he was really enjoying it. He *knew* where he was, …with his family and friends".

The main message for making inclusion happen

What mattered most was Alfred's commitment to keep showing up. It took time for trust to build with group home staff and managers and for the relationship to grow. Also, Adam needed time to trust Alfred. Alfred's patience and consistency built genuine relationships — not just with Adam, but also with everyone around him, helping to reconnect Adam with his family.

Story 9: Bettina being known in her community

Bettina's story is told by Community for Everyone staff

Bettina wanted to learn how to knit and meet like-minded people. Together with the Community for Everyone team, Bettina explored the local community knitting groups. One group of women met at the local library not far from Bettina's home.

Bettina has now attended her library knitting group for 8 months. At first, she went there together with one of the project staff, once the project connected Bettina with Vera, a social connector, they attended together.

Vera and the CfE staff were critical especially at the start for linking Bettina with the other group members, they facilitated introductions and conversations, helped Bettina remember people's names. They looked out for opportunities for Bettina to 'become known'.

Bettina has forged stronger bonds with individual group members at the group. She is known by her name, missed when she doesn't attend, she also knows the other women by name and recognises them if they bump into each other in the neighbourhood.

Around Christmas, someone brought in home baked goods. Bettina does not eat gluten and has reported she often misses out when others have cake and other treats. One of Bettina's connections baked a gluten free cake especially for Bettina, so that she would be included. Another example of 'being known' and considered one of the group was at

Bettina's birthday. One of her newly made friends baked a birthday cake so the group of women celebrated together. Building from the positive social experiences at the knitting group Bettina has grown in her self-confidence and social skills. Bettina has hosted an afternoon tea for the first time at her home and tried other activities in her local community with Vera the social connector.

*Observations by Vera the social connector, "*That group [knitting] is a really good group, even if I disappeared out of the group … and Bettina continued, I feel the group members would still be supportive. I feel [I] wouldn't have to be the 'main person', Bettina could sort of 'fit into' the group and feel included […] feels welcome. When we run into a member from the group on the street, the person will say, 'Oh hi Bettina, how are you?' and Bettina returns a friendly hello. That's nice to see that the connections Bettina is forming with the group extend to outside the group."

Service provider where Bettina's goes during the day

Bettina loves the knitting group. The knitting itself can pose a challenge at times, the other members are quite advanced, but Bettina relishes … the social aspect of the group. She enjoys the socialising. The other members remembered Bettina's birthday and brought in a special cake; this was a significant moment for Bettina. I feel Bettina appears more relaxed and happier these days, she clearly looks forward to going to the weekly activity. She has also told other peers at the day program about the group and they have taken an interest in Bettina's knitting work.

Story 10: Managing change in the connection

James' story is told by Jimmy the social connector and the CfE project staff

James and I spend time at the Day Program he attends. I visit him there most weeks … just turning up regularly has been reassuring; I think James started to know I am not just 'another face'. Gradually, we wanted to start doing things outside of the organised group. With help and support from the CfE team we thought that James might enjoy being in a garden, we planned a visit to the local community garden about 20 minutes away.

When James and I visited the Garden, James was reserved, hesitant to do any of the gardening tasks. He expressed he did not want to participate. James does not communicate with words, he expresses his will through gestures, expressions or actions. It's only been a few times at the garden, I noticed a shift … [James] is more open, curious about what's going on.

CfE project staff

After several visits to the community garden, one day when Jimmy arrived to meet James and go out together, James simply refused. He shut the blinds in his room, turned off the lights, it was his way of saying, "I don't want to go". The following week he expressed a similar dislike for going to the gardens.

That's when the Community for Everyone team stepped in. First the team met to discuss the approach and what happened. One team member met with James's to find out if he wanted to continue with Community for Everyone and be with Jimmy, the social connector. "We just were not sure if it was a one off change of mind or was there an underlying, deeper issue of mistrust".

The project team brought in a bunch of photos and worked out what James wanted to do. We shared a few different activity options with James, and he responded positively with a thumbs up to painting, dancing, making friends and animals. The service providers confirmed James loves animals.

Next, we confirmed if James wanted to keep meeting up with Jimmy. That he also confirmed. We knew we needed to find a different community activity altogether. James indicated he loves animals.

A few weeks later James and Jimmy went to a dog show which they both enjoyed, smiling faces all around. Building from this promising sign of interest, Jimmy the social connector had a friend who lives locally with a dog and arranged to walk the dog. Now James and Jimmy meet up regularly and take his friends dog for walks, James is all smiles and seems to enjoy the experience.

Working closely with the service provider, and being transparent, was really important. They helped brainstorm possibly alternatives. They also suggested new things that we could explore, like an Auslan Sign language course at the library, as James wants to improve his reading and communication skills. Working with the provider meant that they were on board with the changes and supportive of the next attempts to build community engagement for James.

Story 11: Nari finds inclusion with her local church

Nari's story is told by staff and community members, and Nelly the social connector

Nari is a young, bubbly woman. Nari, who speaks Korean and English, wanted to reconnect with her Korean culture. After conversations with Nari and some of the support workers who know her well, it was identified that Nari loves cooking, music and attends church. Nari became part of Community for Everyone early. She wanted to be matched with a social connector to have more opportunities to form connections related to her culture and language.

For almost a year the Community for Everyone team worked to spread the word and engage a social connector who had shared Nari's interests and ideally her cultural background. Nelly, a local community member came forward who shared Nari's interest in Korean culture.

At the same time, the CfE team was discussing the project with numerous community groups, including presenting to church elders and community leaders, most with little to no connection to people with intellectual disability.

After a presentation to church elders, the group members started conversations with each other, asking bigger questions. Examples of the conversations included an older parent, a central member of the congregation, who spoke about the challenges their adult son with disability experienced in life. The deeper conversations generated a greater sense of community, as people came to a understand each other's circumstances. The congregation said they wanted to become involved in Community for Everyone.

Following the invitation from the church group Nari and Nelly the social connector attended a number of multi-lingual and cultural services, adapted by the Reverend to include Korean language readings, to make sure that Nari felt included and welcome.

At first, Nari was shy, being surrounded by new people. Quickly she became more vocal and expressive, also due to the bridging role by Nelly (social connector) introducing Nari and supporting her communication with other members of the group. After only a couple of months, Nari now enthusiastically attends the church service, also helping out with social events organised by the group.

For example, Nari was invited to assist in the preparation of a Korean meal shared by the congregation. On this occasion Nari could demonstrate her cooking skills, something appreciated by the other church members, many of whom are good cooks. This meal preparation role is now ongoing and a true source of recognition and

acknowledgment of Nari's engagement and contributions to the group gatherings.

Growing her membership in the group, Nari, has been invited to dine out with church members at local restaurants together with Nelly the social connector. People go out of their way to find out when Nari is planning to visit next, in order to ensure they can be sure to be at church to greet her.

Nari and Nelly have also attended local Korean festivals, increasing Nari's experience of Korean food, Korean music and customs. Videos have been made and photos taken by Nelly. These photos and videos have been a sharing with Nari's new connections about what she enjoys, making for useful conversation starters.

Nelly, the social connector, is essential to supporting Nari to feel welcome and included in the group. For example, Nelly models how to communicate well; the other church members have become more confident in their interactions with Nari, they know to look out for the non-verbal cues and key expressions.

Church members have told us that they feel more informed and enthusiastic about people with intellectual disability taking part in the events. The congregation has made several inclusion changes to their cultural gatherings and service. This has made it more welcoming for Nari. Nari feels included in the group; she is forming new connections with many of the congregation members that extend beyond Nelly the social connector.

As a result of being involved with Community for Everyone, and getting to know Nari, the church group told our team, they feel more curious to learn from other people with intellectual disability. The church hosted a 'listening meeting' organised by the Sydney Alliance and Side By Side Advocacy to learn about the social isolation experienced by people with intellectual disability and what community groups can do to be more inclusive. After the meeting the Sydney Alliance voted that addressing social isolation would be a key focus for their future work.

Story 12: Managing change in the connection

Rebecca's story is told by the project staff and social connector

After a couple of months, Rebecca was matched with Susi. The project team carefully considered aspects about each person, how do they prefer to spend their time, personality qualities or temperament. Rebecca and Susi shared an interest in craft and animals. Susi, the connector, was not introduced as a friend, rather a person to get to know, to avoid setting high expectations about the relationship.

In the first months, Rebecca and Susi went to local cafes and the library together. They were accompanied by a member from the CfE team. This was to help break ease any uncertainties or communication barriers in the early stages of getting to know each other. The team made sure both women could add to the conversation and develop trust with each other.

On days when the social connector was not available, Rebecca and one CfE staff attended the local library knitting group together. The staff supported Rebecca to engage with the community group, reducing uncertainties from starting something new and unknown. The team also helped Rebecca make decisions about the things she wanted to be involved in. They brought in easy read and photos of the activities in the local area, aligned with her interests, and discussed what taking part might mean.

Once Rebecca and the social connector knew each other better, they spent time without the project staff. The connection developed momentum around the shared love of cats, they visited the Sydney Cats Expo and other events.

With all the careful planning and precautions around matching and supporting people to get to know each, unexpected things can happen. Susi, the social connector, had to attend urgent medical treatment and later disengaged from Community for Everyone, which left Rebecca suddenly without a connector.

The break in the connection had to be sensitively managed. First the project team discussed the change of circumstances in an open conversation with Rebecca. A Community for Everyone team member assumed an interim social connector role, so that Rebecca could continue taking part in her social activities in the community (knitting group). When it was clear Susi was no longer available for her role, the team looked for a replacement connector. Sabine, the new connector, brings a different set of interests, allowing Rebecca to explore new community activities (church), while she continues the library knitting group with support from the project team.

Sabine, the new connector added, "I enjoy getting to know Rebecca. Every week I think, "oh what's something we could do?" I have to keep reminding myself, my role is to support the person to connect with others, not just with me, and to do that we need to build trust with each other."

Story 13: Mike expanding his interests

The story is told by people around Mike, the social connector, project staff and service provider

When Mike started with Community for Everyone, not much was known about his interests or preferences. Mike doesn't use words to communicate and instead uses body language, vocalisations and other informal ways of expressing himself. This can make it harder for others to understand what he enjoys, dislikes or may be trying to communicate.

The project was mindful of Mike's experience of trauma and loneliness, having lived in a large institution for most of his life. Finding something that aligned with Mike's preferences, brought him joy, and created opportunities for connection was a key priority. The social connector tried a range of sensory experiences including smell, touch and different types of music. Through many hours spent together, Abby, the Social Connector, patiently observed Mike's responses and began to notice that he particularly enjoyed the sound and vibrations of acoustic guitar music. This came as a surprise to many people involved in Mike's life, including service providers, given Mike's significant hearing loss.

This discovery sparked an idea: to create a joyful, social gathering where Mike could experience live music, feel vibrations, and spend time with other people. This led to the creation of the 'Sunday Music Jam Sessions', where anyone connected to Community for Everyone is welcome to join on a Sunday, bring an instrument, and play music together.

Mike clearly enjoys the Sunday music sessions; he smiles, engages with his whole body and appears energised by the experience. Mike also likes it when a small speaker is placed on his body, so he can feel and sense the vibrations of the music.

The service provider commented,

We have seen great changes in Mike. He seems to really enjoy the time with Abby, he is smiling, relaxed, out in the sunshine. Spending time with Abby is a positive experience for him. Surprising for our team was to find out how Mike can sense music and sounds. We assumed he was profoundly deaf. Now that our staff know this about Mike, they more regularly put on music for Mike, actively use things like bells and speakers, staff are taking a more sensory approach to sound which Mike seems to enjoy.

Mike's story highlights the importance of time, patience, and close observation in understanding the preferences of people who communicate in alternative ways. Once Mike's enjoyment of music was recognised, new opportunities for joy, connection, and participation opened up.

Story 14: Benjamin finding community inclusion

Benjamin's story is told by the project team and the service provider

Benjamin is a vibrant and funny man. He enjoys meeting new people, solving puzzles and watching sports. Before joining Community for Everyone Benjamin mostly did things in the community together with other people with disability, rarely going out by himself.

When the CfE team met with Benjamin they spent many hours with him to discover what community and group activities might interest him, the places he'd like to get to know and what passions he has. Getting to know Benjamin meant deeply listening, meeting up with Benjamin repeatedly to get to know him well, bringing in photos of activities that might meet his interests, and explaining what to expect in a range of community situations, such as to discuss what a trivia night might look like and what it would mean to take part. After a lot of brainstorming and refining ideas, as well as speaking to the provider, Benjamin with the CfE team decided to try out the local Trivia group near to his home.

After the decision was made to 'give trivia a go' a CfE team member went there one evening to assess the venue for wheelchair access, find out more about the atmosphere of the evening, to meet with trivia goers and experience the flow of the event from beginning to end so there would be no surprises. When the option seemed favourable, next, Benjamin joined the CfE team to find out for himself. As he enjoyed the first evening he started going to trivia on a weekly basis.

*The **service provider** commented on the exploration process,* "[Community for Everyone] does really clever matching … like with Benjamin, him going to the trivia

group, it's so apt for Benjamin. He's really good at trivia he really loves it, and the activity opens up the potential of him finding … of meeting people who will share the same passion. It is something he can look forward to and be part of the community in a very regular, ordinary community setting. It's a clever match."

After a 2-3 months of regularly coming and contributing to trivia, Benjamin has made three friends in the group. His new mates, who share the same passion for facts and quizzes, count Benjamin to their trivia team; they wait for him or will send text messages if he is late.

The CfE team who worked alongside Benjamin to find a suitable activity that matched his interests said, "Benjamin has found true community inclusion at the trivia evening. There are three men who know Benjamin well, we anticipate these relationships will be ongoing. […] We found the right 'thing' for Benjamin … we took considerable time to get to know him, we listened, we asked questions and kept coming back to see Benjamin. When the idea of trivia arose, we took photos, we described what Benjamin could expect from the evening. […] The first few times, I went with Benjamin, facilitated introductions with the other players but remained in the background. Benjamin really feels welcome and participate in the group. This is the first time in his life Benjamin has found community belonging outside where he lives."

The CfE team also reported that they were looking into a couple of other activities for Benjamin to do in the community, one being a Queer friendly church group, as Benjamin has expressed an interest in meeting new people and exploring his sexual identity.

Story 15: Setting up the conditions for connection

Peter's story is told from the perspective of a project team member

Peter is in his 60s and lives with two other men. Like many people in supported living, Peter's life runs on a pretty structured routine. Most activities are scheduled. This structure does help Peter in some ways; he knows what to expect. But it also raises a gap: Peter doesn't have any family or unpaid connections in his life. Every person is "on the clock." This means Peter can feel lonely and socially isolated.

When the CfE team met with Peter, we knew we couldn't 'just bring in' a volunteer social connector into his life. The conditions weren't right. My role as a project team member was to undertake the foundational groundwork: to build enough trust and comfort so that a social connector could eventually be introduced with a greater

chance of success for the connection.

This groundwork happened in two parts.

First, Peter and I got to know each other on his terms, patiently and gradually, starting in his room, which is where he feels safest. We talked about his passion for military models. pending time in the home also created opportunities to build trust with support staff and gently introduce the CfE approach, helping people understand why moving slowly mattered and how relationships beyond a 'rostered life' could become possible

Building these foundations also meant patiently developing relationships with staff through kindness, consistency, and positive role modelling.

Once Peter felt comfortable meeting in his home, we gradually shifted to another setting — the car, which became our new 'safe space'. We would drive to familiar places, sit together, eat lunch, and talk about Peter's interests.

Once Peter trusted me more, as did the providers where he lived, we ventured to new places in the community, places that connect to Peters' interest in military history. Peter was still not ready to leave the car, however, he was happy to be in a new area. This engagement and trust building took several months, meeting up regularly, slowing proposing new places and building trust with each other.

A recent 'win' was when Peter attended an ANZAC Day ceremony. While Peter enjoys military parades, he had not attended one for over 35 years. Peter and I drove to a spot where he could safely observe the parade roll past without having to leave the car. He enjoyed this day very much it reminded him of his childhood.

Leaving the safety of his familiar environment and home is a huge step for Peter. Peter often worries about being out in the community, especially at a major event with many people. Peter trusting me to go outside his familiar environment to a big event proved that with the right support – patience, deep listening, intentional planning and informed consent – Peter can attend new place, have fun and engage with people he has not built a bond yet.

Building on our trustworthy and deepening connection, I recently supported Peter to attend a health appointment, alongside a close support worker. Both Peter and the support team have become increasingly 'open and flexible' regarding my involvement, inviting me into decisions and moments like a health appointment that sit outside the "traditional scope of the project".

This shift represents a move toward a more flexible, supportive connection that isn't bound by 'strict guidelines and regulations' rather by trust and Peter's informed

consent on what he wants to do. Next, we are gradually and carefully planning to introduce a new face, social connector, to build trust and familiarity with Peter.

By doing the initial 'ground work' we believe we have set up the foundations for Peter and the support staff around him to be more open to connecting with a volunteer connector. Peter's story reminds us that building trust and connection with people who are profoundly socially isolated takes a person-to-person, slow and intentional approach to building trustworthy relationships.

Story 16: Dot becoming a social connector

My friend [a connector] was involved with the project, and that's how it all started for me. My friend kept telling me about what she does and how much she enjoys it … First, I had a look around on their website. I loved how the project was presented online, the reports, the concept … Next, thing … I came to one of their community meetings [in person]. I listened to the peer leaders speak about their experiences. It shook me a little, I must say. I understood how de-humanising it is to only have paid support in your life, people checking on you, a manicured life. Hearing the stories touched me.

Then, I too wanted to be part of the change.

In the past I used to work as a disability support worker, I became good friends with some of the people I supported. In service language, it's known as crossing 'professional boundaries'. The Community for Everyone project, it really spoke to me!

Next thing [after the in-person community session] I sat down with [project staff], over coffee and we talked it through, how it might work for me, what my options were.

I wanted to be clear from the start that I was in it for the long run, but I also needed to know that there was some flexibility, for example, I didn't have to go to the [community activity] every Saturday morning … which I think, it was going to kill me [laughs].

Having the option to go 'most Saturdays' and knowing other people were involved in Daniel's life removed any pressure, responsibility I felt …

Now that I am a social connector with Daniel, I try to come as often as I can, not because *I have to* but because I really enjoy spending time together … the time and opportunity to be outside with others. It is really enjoyable, and I can bring my own family [children] with me. They enjoy hanging out with Daniel.

So far, I enjoy my role and being part of the project has opened up a lot for me … One frustration I have is that I would like to spend more time with Daniel and get to know him

better. The truth is my time is limited to the shared activity we do Saturday mornings because I have a young family and busy life.

Story 17: Rita's experience of compatibility in the connection

I am semi-retired … still I really wanted to get involved more with my community. When I heard of the project, I was all in … There were not many days I could full heartedly say yes, but this one day suited me, I had a free morning. [The project team] kept gently asking and nudging me to give it a go, [staff] kept speaking with me about the opportunity … She kept me engaged, but at no point did I feel swept up along the way … After thinking it over, I said yes!

When I started in the project, [project team] introduced me to one man. We casually spent a couple of hours together, all three of us, but it seemed we didn't quite get along, there was no connection between us. I didn't feel like the [focus person] wanted to spend time with me.

A week later [the project staff] introduced me to Robert, we have something in common. We instantly clicked, we got along well that first day … I can say, I really enjoy spending time with Robert and getting to know him better. I am interested to find out more about him, what he enjoys and likes and what he doesn't like. Robert is clear about what he wants he will express himself clearly. I am learning to read him and understand what he is saying to me.

Importantly, Robert and I, we both seem to enjoy each other's company, we like doing the activity together, we laugh and sing together, we have fun … It has certainly been an enriching experience for me.

Story 18: Building trust in the relationship

This story is told by Cathy the social connector

Mel is my uncle; he lived with intellectual disability for almost his entire life. Mel had the support of his family, the community and, more importantly, someone who helped him grow and develop. He had many friends in the community. Mel was able to express how he felt without words. He always had plans for the weekend; he made sure to get out and enjoy each day. Mel was important in my life, the happiest person I had ever met.

With my psychology background, I was used to 'doing' – assessments, applying

techniques, and being active in noticing behaviours around me. When I joined the project as a volunteer social connector, I was nervous, thinking, "What if I don't know what 'to do'?"

I now understand that connecting with others goes beyond knowing how 'to do' things. [...] I went on to understand ... it's not about doing, first of all, it is about being with a person ... that's how I came to develop a relationship with Cornelia. My role is to be a 'bridge' towards connection with others. Once I understood, I felt more confident to use the strategies the project gave me, to seek out opportunities for Cornelia to connect with others.

It's been a positive experience, but at times is has been challenging. Interpersonal relationships are messy, misaligned expectations and misunderstandings. Also, trying to be with Cornelia, while also being a bridge to connect her to other people can feel like doing two things at the same time.

Being part of Community for Everyone has been a rewarding experience. I see little changes in Cornelia's growth in confidence to engage with others or to leave her home. This connection and work has benefited me too. I am learning the value of patience, vulnerability and the time needed to build trust.

Cornelia has also taught me I don't need to be an expert, but to hold space for someone, to make them feel safe, listened to and heard – that's core to connection. For me it has been a meaningful experience.

Story 19: Sustaining connections long term

Dina tells her own story of change

I have known Daniel for nearly 2 years now and we have a lot in common. We both love routine, and like Daniel, I enjoy collecting things too. We have a lot in common; we love routine, I am a bit like Daniel, I also like to collect things. I love that we understand each other and have similar interests. Our relationship is built on trust. So I think he trusts that if I say I'll come on Saturday, I'll be there, unless I break a leg! That steadiness, reliability, repeated engagement is reassuring it builds trust and connection over time.

Daniel and I share other interests too. We have the parkrun in common, but we also go together once a month to my brother's motorbike club. We sit down, have a chat and a sausage sandwich. So it's just like any friendship. We enjoy each other's company.

Because we have common interests, we like going there regularly, we enjoy the group, that sustains our friendship. The shared group and activity … and the connection we have between us, we enjoy spending time with each other, that sustains it.

After more than a year, I can clearly say, you know, yeah, our friendship sustains itself in my eyes. I don't think, "Oh God, I've got to get up again on Saturday at 6.30" like that, otherwise I wouldn't do it … it wouldn't be sustainable if I didn't enjoy it too. Like any friendship, if it felt like an obligation, it wouldn't last.

I also enjoy meeting the other people who know Daniel and are part of his circle, we have a little group, so I enjoy hanging out with the other people, also I love seeing how Daniel is growing with his friendships and connections, how his confidence is changing.

What changes have you noticed in Daniel?

We know each other better, we speak about more topics that matter to us. We talk about what upsets us and what makes us happy, that's what deepens our connection. Really knowing each other. […] Also I love sharing Dan's joy, it can be really infectious his laughter and when he is overjoyed, for example, at the parkrun when some mates bring magazines for Daniel, being there with him, it makes the experience richer for me. Both of us can say, "it was the best day ever".

The basis of deep connection or friendship is doing something you both enjoy together. To me, Daniel and I could just sit around having coffee, I'd still enjoy it because it's a good chat, it's the interaction between us that works.

In the future, I'd like Daniel to have more autonomy at parkrun and for staying in touch over the week to be easier for us, currently it happens through a landline phone. Also, for the group home staff know Daniel really well, it would be nice to sit together with them and share … and think "okay, what next? What could we do more, what else is possible?"

Story 20: Collaboration with a provider

This story is told by a provider involved in Community for Everyone

When we heard of Community for Everyone we were interested to be involved. The lives of people with intellectual disability are very much dictated by service providers, the rules and regulations, a lot of risk aversion. Many people we support used to live in institutions, with few opportunities to make decisions.

Community for Everyone is excellent. It's a more constructive style of doing this kind of work ... connecting people to social things outside. As a provider we appreciate the time the team and the social connectors can spend to get to know the person, ... finding out what a person's goals or interests are. Once a person is involved in social activities in the community, they enjoy, we really notice a change in the person.

We feel Community for Everyone has done some 'clever' matching, finding community activities that really touch someone's being, that they are passionate about, and that the social connector also cares about, there's a lot of work that's gone into this work.

For example, Bettina, she received a birthday card from the ladies at the library, I don't know when she last got a birthday card from someone who wasn't paid to, it is nice to know that someone else just sort of thinking about her. One of the women from the group recently invited Bettina to go shopping together, we can see those connections growing and getting stronger. Its working! I think it's been going really well.

And the changes we have seen with Rebecca, she is diligent at calling her cousins for their birthdays, but she never receives any calls herself. She'd wait for days to get a card, or a phone call from them. Because she rings them religiously on their birthday. Often, she would sit wait around, look for days, and sometimes just cry. So when the knitting group ladies celebrated her birthday with her this was a really special moment for Rebecca. She felt included and cared about.

Any other impacts you noticed?

There is a lot of peer sharing going on. Rebecca and Bettina, they share what they are up to, the photos of the community group activities and the connections and friends they are making. So this peer-sharing is bringing new ideas to other people. While our staff are stretched at capacity and we don't have the time to support people to do these community activities, we know that other people may be interested.

Any impacts on your organisation or staff?

I believe the staff seeing this type of work and how the people at the centre respond and take it up, there's a sense of relief that people have got some good things happening in their life. If you find more connectors, have spaces, we have other people who might want to join.

Community for Everyone at the start talked to the staff, being open and transparent about what it is and how it could work, that was important to gain staff trust. Also the management decided not to do any risk assessments for the social outings, we treat them as someone going to see family. The connectors are friends and they are going out together. It's helped shaped how we think about community engagement as an organisation.

For me, it has shaped how I think, what does community, what does 'community access' actually mean? There are only so many times someone can go bowling. The framework you use looking at a community group, a place, consistency, building relationships over the activity, and novelty or whatever. It's been really helpful!

Story 21: Engaging with a new provider

Engaging with a new provider required a gradual and deliberate process of building trust over time. We began by seeding the idea with management first, followed by a joint conversation with the team leader. The project team discussed the benefits of the project, supported by evidence and research into the importance of informal relationships after the closure of institutions. They also shared the background and credentials of the Social Connector, their previous role in an aged care visitation scheme, a one-page profile to introduce who the connector was and why this role was important to them.

The project team then focused on establishing shared goals around supporting social connections. This process took time to acknowledge, respect and address staff concerns and not to dismiss any constraints (e.g., about privacy, accountability and risk, including about duty of care, changes to routine or escalation of behaviours). The project team reassured the provider they would minimise any impact on their current arrangements and that the approach was collaborative and guided by their expertise as the people who knew the person best. To support this, we ran a workshop with provider management and team leaders, inviting ongoing dialogue and encouraging staff to contact us directly to explore opportunities for involvement.

Alfred (social connector) then started visiting Adam every week. The first seven months the pair spent time together almost exclusively around or inside Adam's home. Alfred followed the pace and routines set by the group home. Alfred remained present and observant, allowing the two men to get to know each other. This pace demonstrated to the group home staff that Alfred was reliable, trustworthy and respectful in his interactions with Adam and the staff. After two months a staff member suggested the pair go for a walk in the neighbourhood without paid staff supervision. Eventually staff agreed Adam could also go in Alfred's car without further supervision.

Story 22: Gaining organisational buy-in

This story is told from a service provider perspective

I've worked with people with disability for most of my life. I have seen the difference when somebody with profound disability has people in their life … love and friendships … also when a person is completely isolated. Every person has a basic human right to belong in their community.

Being part of Community for Everyone, I felt like this was an opportunity to just get back to why we are here [as an organisation], which is connecting and supporting people to have the best quality of life that they can. We were already working to ensure our staff are aware of the principles of active support for people with intellectual disability.

I heard about the project at the ASID conference, one of the peer leaders was presenting on the importance of community, relationships and friendships. The approach aligned closely with work we were already doing to improve quality of life. Community for Everyone felt strongly aligned with a human rights approach.

We're working in a highly regulated environment. It can lead to a perception that [service providers] have control of every facet of somebody's life. This mindset stands in our way … thinking in new and different ways. Like letting a community member, who's not been vetted by us [our organisation], to come into a group home and be connected to a person with disability. That was something new we had to consider!

We were open to the project. It took some time, eventually our team met with Hunter Circles, we sat down and developed a shared vision. It took a few attempts to come together and work out the details. After our first meeting I felt excited! Next, Hunter Circles and I met with the senior and the regional leadership. It was important to bring them on board …

I think a senior leader, myself, being at the meetings, facilitating the conversation, meant everyone knew [that partnering with the project] was important, we explained the why, answered questions, unlocked their enthusiasm, … we have incredible leaders in the sector. Who genuinely believe quality support, with focus on quality of life can make a difference in people's lives.

To keep the momentum going I kept following up and asking for progress updates.

Lessons for other organisations: What helped was our organisation's vision, from the board down. It would have been harder to get buy in if our organisation were business focused. We had already started groundwork with another expert, working on building capacity of our staff, reviewing our organisational processes. … I felt we had a licence to go in with the Community for Everyone project. We also have excellent staff and managers, they are committed. But me being part of the meetings helped the teams keep momentum and committed to the project.

Story 23: Service provider change

We were unsure at first, but early on, we could see how Mike and Abby developed a solid connection; clearly there was understanding. Abby had experience working with people with intellectual disability in a professional capacity. What helped [our team] in the beginning was the consistency, Abby came each week, at the same time … we could start trusting the program.

As a provider we can get stuck in the mindset, 'oh we have tried that before, it didn't work'. So with Community for Everyone, I feel we are pushing some limits, shaking things up a little … and we can see how Mike clearly enjoys the [music sessions] how he is being more open with other people. For example he started to reach to other people to seek touch, he never liked to be touched before.

[Community for Everyone] is pushing us … to try new ideas that Mike might like, enjoy. The staff are also content to know Mike has other people in his life now. At first some were sceptical. […] But seeing Mike come out of his shell, the staff are supportive, they have come on board. … What is convincing is the consistency of your approach: showing up, same time, asking questions, spending quality time with Mike, feeding information back to us about the things you identified that might be helpful.

The main challenge we have noticed are break-downs in communication, as the staff rotate, the information that you need from us, can get missing, it is not always passed on properly. Staff can also be in different roles, so at our end the lack of consistency can create barriers for the social connectors to come in.

Being part of [Community for Everyone] has been great for us, some support workers are trying … they are thinking differently, 'what else is possible'.

Story 24: Supporting connection and grieving

William's story of how he was supported through difficult times is told by the CfE team

William and his close friend Samuel have been lifelong friends. They lived in the same institution for many years. When the men moved, they lost touch with each other. After becoming part of Community for Everyone, William was very clear, he wanted to rekindle a crucial social connection in his life with his dear friend Sam.

To start, the project team spent considerable time meeting with William, to get to know his interests, also the people who are, and in the past were, important in his life. The project team came together around William to brainstorm how the reconnection could happen, where the men would meet. Once the practicalities were resolved, by bringing the services providers on board, the CfE team arranged the logistics of the meeting.

When William and Sam got to finally meet again in person, this was a special and meaningful event. During the meeting William and Sam hugged and held hands repeatedly. In the evening, William said he did not want to leave his friend behind. The Community for Everyone team reassured William that there would be regular opportunities to meet.

Going forward the CfE team organised fortnightly times for William and Sam to spend time together doing the things they enjoyed, sharing memories or just hanging out together. Rekindling this friendship was important to both. Other paid supporters commented how the meetings between William and Sam were a 'centre point of joy and emotional wellbeing'.

One day, the Community for Everyone team received a notification of Sam's passing. This sudden, unexpected news took the team by surprise.

The team were mindful about who, when and how to share this devastating news with William. William and I met in person at our office; I said I had sad news. At first William

responded in a measured way, he said he would miss his friend. We stayed together for an hour, I made space and time to sit together, I even cried at the time.

That morning the project team held a morning tea. We asked William if he wanted to join; the team used this opportunity to commemorate William and Sam's friendship. William seemed content to see how others cared about his loss, his face lit up in a smile. Creating this opportunity for a shared ritual, closure and connection was important. We were mindful that while it was upsetting for William to learn what had happened to his friend Sam, it was important to share this information, as in the past some people never found out what had happened to their loved ones.

The following weeks, the Community for Everyone team checked in with William to see how he was feeling. Together with William they were planning a memorial to celebrate and remember his friend.

Story 25: Communities changing through connection

This story is told through the perspectives of community members involved

Across the Community for Everyone project, community members spoke about the impact of getting to know people with intellectual disability through ordinary shared activities — like parkrun, volunteering, church and music. Over time, people stopped being "new" and became part of the group. Other group members told us about the difference these relationships made in their own lives.

At parkrun, Daniel quickly became a familiar and valued part of the Saturday morning routine. Henry, a member of parkrun, said:

"Daniel is such an important part of the community because he embodies everything parkrun stands for. It's just so awesome every week just to come and see Daniel's smiling face. And he just gives it a go. It's just awesome to see. He comes out every week, gives it a go, and always has a smile on his face. He approaches everyone, puts a smile on everyone's face, and he's just a great bloke to be around. And why wouldn't you want him as part of the community. Daniel really makes the community better."

Diana noticed the effect Daniel had on the wider group: "I think the most important thing is that Daniel has brought a sense of connection with the community. He's

brought that to us as well. I think the whole parkrun community really enjoys seeing Daniel here."

In another community group, the Botanic Gardens, volunteers described how Murray gradually became more relaxed and confident. One volunteer reflected: "When Murray first started, he was a bit shy and reserved, and he's not so much now. He interacts with people and he'll talk to people, and he's more with the crowd now than by himself. He's become much more confident with the group."

Another volunteer said Murray was respected as an ordinary member of the group:

"Nothing special, he's just Murray. He hasn't been put in a 'box', he's just been allowed to be another person."

"Murray loves to come up beside you. Where before he'd stand back a little bit, but now he sidles up and has a bit more conversation. And it's just good to see. You can see the smile in his eyes. He's just one of the team."

A couple of volunteers described the importance of their interpersonal relationship with Murray and the role of companionship:

"Humour. Love his sense of humour … to me, that's important, because I like to laugh. Just having people around you is really good. And having a sense of community. Yes! That's important to me."

Another member of the group said how 'ordinary moments' had become part of everyday life for him:

"If I see him up the paddock, I'll blow the horn and we'll wave to each other. And Murray I can talk to. A lot of people I don't [talk to], but with Murray I do. I just think it's important for Murray to be here. I enjoy his company. It helps everybody. You know, I'm getting just as much out of him being here as what he is."

Murray' community connections also grew through being part of the monthly church men's dinner. Ryan, one of the members who gave Murray a lift, said:

"I first got involved with Murray through Sam, my wife, who suggested it would be a good idea for him to come to the dinner. George and I got together and went out and

picked him up and brought him in, and he seemed to enjoy it and looked forward to coming all the time."

Ryan reflected that what made the difference for him, was simply being asked to get involved in a practical way:

"Murray wanted to come, and someone asked if I could help with giving him a lift. I thought it was a good idea and I had the time. It's only once a month. Sometimes people are willing, but they just need someone to ask them. You get a buzz when you are there for other people."

Over time, what began as 'offering a lift' became an ordinary and valued part of the church community.

At the Saturday ukulele group, Robert gradually became part of the rhythm of the group. People described looking forward to seeing him each week and noticing when he was absent. One member said:

"Robert lights up our Saturdays. He is the star of the group. He strums the C6 chord with gusto, brings his infectious laugh, his fabulous singing, greets everyone, joins in with all the jokes. We miss him when he's not here."

Another member reflected on the friendship between Robert and Rita, and how it had shaped her own understanding of connection:

"It just brightens up my day to spend time with Robert at ukulele. He is such a gift to our group. He's charming, warm, always gives me a warm smile and greets me every week. I love seeing the deep friendship he has with Rita – it's helped me understand friendship differently. It's one of the most beautiful friendships I've seen. Robert doesn't use many words to communicate but that doesn't matter – you can feel the love between them."

The organiser described how Robert's participation had grown over time:

"Robert's love of ukulele has grown so much over the last year. He's singing more, using more words, strumming more in time – I've loved to watch his musical skills

develop. He is the glue that binds our Saturday group together. We all miss him when he's not here."

When Robert misses a session, members notice:

"The members ask after him if he's missed out. We make an announcement about where he is if he doesn't make it because people love him and are concerned about him."

The organiser also described how people had begun finding practical ways to help sustain Robert's involvement:

"I love that he has a WhatsApp group so everyone can work out how to make sure he gets here each week and if he can't make it they are planning to go to his home to play with him. He is a unique bringer of gifts and joy."

Similarly, Gabriel's involvement with a Landcare Group gradually became part of the group's life. Richard, Chairperson of the group, reflected:

"When Gabriel came to join us, we were delighted to be able to share the joy of Landcare and getting amongst nature with him. His sense of humour has endeared him to us all and we hope has given him a sense of belonging and inclusion so that his social life has been enriched."

Susan, the group secretary, described Gabriel's regular participation: "When Gabriel arrives at Landcare, he greets each of us individually with a handshake. He's a happy man and he gets in and joins in all the weeding. He wants to learn, he loves looking at all the nature, and we're so glad we can support him in his journey forward."

Suan further reflected on how Gabriel had become part of the weekly routine:

"He joins in with weeding and is interested in all of the nature that surrounds him while he is doing so. He also likes to have a chat at morning tea break, along with a Kingston biscuit. His contribution is very much appreciated, and we hope he will continue to be an important, valued member of our group."

Across the different community groups, members described similar experiences: people with intellectual disability, by regularly attending over time, became familiar with others through shared activities and regular contact. Over time, people became part of the rhythm of community life — looked forward to, chatted with, noticed when absent, and cared about. In several stories, what began as a small invitation — giving someone a lift, saying hello, making room in a group — gradually became friendship,

routine and an ordinary part of community life. People started to notice, appreciate, value and celebrate the contributions that the person was making to the lives and experiences of others.

Story 26: Daniel's Circle — Growing connections around one person

This story is told through the perspectives of Daniel's Circle members

What began as Daniel attending parkrun gradually grew into something 'bigger' — a group of people who know him well, spend time together, and think together about what else might matter to Daniel and his life.

Gradually different people became involved in Daniel's life and 'circle' taking on different roles. Some helped with pick up and drop of at parkrun, others started going on regular walks with Daniel, one circle member took Daniel to the monthly motorbike club gatherings, or simply spending time together. Rather than one person supporting "everything", a small network of people and friends gradually formed around Daniel.

Jenny, one of the circle members, became involved after being asked by Hunter Circles.

Jenny recalls, "I got involved because Jen asked me. People with disability being part of the community wasn't something I'd thought of much before, but knowing Jen, I thought I'd like to give it a go."

What appealed to Jenny was that the "ask", invitation to become part of Daniel's social network, felt manageable at the beginning: "It was a sort of low-key ask. You can come once a month or whatever suits."

Over time, what began as 'helping out' with a lift developed into a deeper friendship. "I like talking to Daniel, I like hanging out with him, I like hanging out with the other people that turn up with him that are part of his circle. It's kind of like he is the star of parkrun. It's fun just hanging out with him."

Jenny described how familiarity and trust built over time: "I've known him for two years, I just know we have become closer friends because these days I see his eyes light up when he sees me and he says excitedly, 'Hello Jenny!' and we have a hug."

Daniel's Circle now gets together every six weeks after parkrun. The gatherings are mostly social — a chance to catch up and spend time together over a hot drink. The meetings also provide opportunity to think about what else Daniel might enjoy and how people can get involved to make it happen.

Dina, a circle member, noted: "We've got a little team around Daniel now, so there's always someone to walk with him at parkrun."

As people got to know Daniel better, new ideas emerged.

Daniel loves trains and motorbikes, and through conversations together the group came up with the idea of attending a monthly motorbike club. Then the idea of train trips together. More recently, the Circle has been thinking together about whether there might be a volunteering opportunity involving trains.

Dina explained: "Friendship grows, doesn't it? You start imagining possibilities for each other."

Circle members also found themselves learning together. One practical challenge was communication. Daniel mostly communicated through a landline phone, making it harder to stay connected during the week. Together, the group came up with the idea of an iPad. Everyone is now learning how to use it together and exploring whether Daniel might take on a role as one of the photographers at parkrun.

Making a film about Daniel at parkrun unexpectedly helped strengthen relationships too. The process of filming created opportunities for Circle members and parkrun participants to spend more time together and get to know one another better.

Recently, the national parkrun team contacted the group about making a film focused on belonging at parkrun, centred around Daniel. For Circle members, this felt meaningful because it reflected something they had already noticed — Daniel had become someone people knew, greeted, laughed with and missed when he was not there.

Dina said her friendship with Daniel mattered to her: "People sometimes ask me what the friendship means, and honestly, I can't quantify it. I can't do that with my other friends either. There's just a connection. I like him. I care about him. He just matters to me."

For Jenny, being part of Daniel's Circle changed how she thought about friendship and community altogether: "If somebody wanted to get involved, I would say have an open mind, be patient, and expect to become part of the broader community too — part of parkrun, and part of his circle of friends."

What started as 'one connection' gradually grew into a network of relationships — people getting together on a regular basis, supporting Daniel to get a lift to parkrun, celebrating birthdays, learning new skills and the group continuing to ask: *"What else matters to Daniel?"*

Appendix B Evaluation approach

This action research evaluation is measuring the effectiveness, process and outcomes for profoundly isolated people with intellectual disability and social connectors in the Community for Everyone project.

The study is from October 2024 to June 2026.

The evaluation aims to:

1. measure outcomes for profoundly isolated people with intellectual disability and volunteer social connectors
2. assess the effectiveness of strategies and processes for building and maintaining social connections, training and support to social connectors to achieve the intended project outcomes
3. identify strengths and weaknesses of the project, and how these can be addressed
4. identify lessons from the project for policy and practice for extending social inclusion and belonging for profoundly isolated people with intellectual disability.

The UNSW and Flinders research team closely collaborated with project team members to undertake the evaluation data collection methods (Table 1). These methods were co-designed with the project to align with the project goals, approach and inclusive research methods.

Table 2: Methods and data sources by evaluation question

Evaluation aim	Data source
Outcomes and impact, effectiveness of process	
Measure 1) social outcomes for profoundly isolated people with intellectual disability, and 2) outcomes for social connectors connected to Community for Everyone	Stories of change Interviews Social network mapping
Determine the overall effectiveness of the project in achieving its intended outcomes	Observations Small group interviews
Assess the effectiveness of strategies and processes to build social connections, as well as support to volunteer social connectors to achieve the intended project outcomes	Interviews Observations
Identify strengths and weaknesses of the project, including areas for improvement and how these can be addressed	Interviews Program document review
Identify lessons from the project for policy and practice on broadening social inclusion	Interviews
Indicators of project success	
Number of people with disability and social connectors who participate in the project.	Program data
Number of participants who report social connections	Interviews Stories of change Social network mapping
Participating social connectors show an increase in confidence in advancing the social connections with people with disability.	Interviews Observations

Table 3: Data for analysis by participant group

	Participants	Number
Individual/small group interview/discussion, story of change, video, photos and written project reflections.	People with disability	17
	Social connectors	18
	Peer leaders	4
	Disability providers	9
	Project team (paid staff)	7
	Project advisory group members	3
	Family members	2
	Community members	11
Observation (by research team)	Project activities	12
Program document review	Both locations	all

The evaluation study, including data collection tools, interview questions, consent forms and recruitment material are approved by the UNSW Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), approval number iRECS 8197.

Appendix C Intended outcomes, activities and project logic

Community for everyone intended project outcomes.

1.1 Intended outcomes for profoundly isolated people with intellectual disability

Community for Everyone aimed to achieve inclusive and social belonging for profoundly isolated people with intellectual disability:

Enhance social capital by increasing the number of informal relationships and friendships in a person's life. The focus was on the quality and diversity of social networks and relationships, and people's active and meaningful participation 'being known'.

Community inclusion and belonging with people with intellectual disability

- create opportunities for the person to try new things, find out what they like
- people pursue their interests and passions
- build relationships with others in their local community
- people make meaningful contributions and connections with others
- build choice and control with support from people (including social connectors) who know them well

Build awareness of safety and advocacy through raising connections within a person's network; capacity of informal connectors to connect to advocacy. The longer term outcomes are for people to have a circle/group of people around them to safeguard their decision making and choices and reduce the risks of harms associated with social isolation.

1.2 Intended outcomes for social connectors

Intended project outcomes for social connectors in the Community for Everyone were:

Connections and friendships with profoundly isolated people with intellectual disability and other people involved with the person (i.e., other social connectors, community group members, circle members)

Raised awareness, insight and understanding of informal support networks and the importance of relationships and social connections in the lives of people with intellectual disability

Shared learning and personal growth through project processes, like being a member of a community of practice and participation in other events, to support connection, sharing and learning across the project

Increased awareness of informal networks to support decisions and confidence of people with intellectual disability to try something new, speak up for themselves and seek out advocacy when needed.

1.3 Intended community outcomes including for disability service providers

Community for Everyone collaborates with community groups, local organisations and disability service providers. These collaborators are central to engaging isolated people with intellectual disability, raising and sustaining awareness of the project's objectives. Intended outcomes for local communities and providers are:

Greater awareness and understanding of disability service providers and the broader community of the importance of freely given relationships and social connections in the lives of people with intellectual disability.

Enhancing awareness of the facilitators and obstacles to social inclusion, including the ways disability service providers can influence these connections.

The Community for Everyone team developed Indicators of Success (Table 4) to guide the project values, activities and actions and guide the project impacts and outcomes.

Table 4: Community for Everyone: Indicators of success

Theme	Indicators of success
Awareness	● Becoming aware of being engaged in community – I can have a place in the community ● Awareness of community options and that I can participate in them ● Respect is expected ● Evaluates risk in a supported way ● That there is someone who knows and values me for who I am who is not paid to be there ● That I am a person worthy of dignity and respect ● Asking – What more is possible?
Autonomy	● Being understood using my own method of communication ● Time and space given to allow expression of preferences ● Opportunity to try and reject new things ● An opportunity to meaningfully choose how to spend time ● Buys something by self or as a result of choice ● Changing my mind - and having this accepted ● Having control of the pace of relationship development ● Choosing when social connector comes/goes – amount of involvement, when, where (e.g., access to bedroom) ● Exhibits individuality/personality in clothes, personal belongings, home environment (decoration style and contents) ● Person has opportunity to capture/show what is important to them ● More home-like house/accommodation ● Get better support, more relevant/preferred, from paid support ● Autonomy in activities – when, where, how, who
Involvement and participation	● People try something new ● Having opportunities for new, different experiences ● Chance to find out 'what I like' ● Being out with a friend or group, not a support worker ● Choosing to join a peer network for a strategic reason – not just to spend time with people
Relation ships	● Meets new people ● Person is in ordinary spaces in community ● Being introduced to community in a meaningful way – positive introduction ● Time and space given to build relationships ● Somebody is known to someone else ● Strengthening a current relationship ● Being recognised by others ● Knowing a person more, using this knowledge to have a relevant conversation (not random small talk) ● Finding a person who may play a long-term, non-paid role in their life ● Having issues responded to – someone recognises something is wrong

Theme	Indicators of success
Belonging and contributing	● More roles within community ● Moving from being present to participating e.g. church attendance – morning tea attendance - helping set up/serve ● Birthday is remembered/acknowledged – celebration of milestones ● Reconnecting with previous interest, place, people, things, food ● Reconnecting with culture ● Having your culture respected ● Increased respect ● Person contributing to someone/something else ● Capturing a person's story – sharing themselves in the way they want
Community gains (disability service providers, broader community)	● Increased awareness of possibilities for relationships with a person with intellectual disability ● Increased understanding that accessibility is not just physical ● Increased understanding of difference between access and inclusion ● Role modelling of good, inclusive practice ● Creating a ripple to a wave of change ● Asking – What more is possible?

Source: Side by Side and Hunter Circles 2025

1.4 Community for Everyone activities and processes to achieve outcomes

Community for Everyone activities and processes

Community for Everyone established a range of processes to centre lived experience within the project, deliver activities to match and pair a focus person with intellectual disability and social connectors and support relationship building with the aim of achieving social belonging outcomes with people with intellectual disability.

Centring lived experience. The project is led and co-designed by paid peers with lived experience of intellectual disability. Four peer leaders with intellectual disability are involved in decisions and governance of the project. Peer leaders drive the design of resources, develop material (stories, videos), are involved in the co-delivery of workshops and training of social connectors and help run community events, the project's dissemination and evaluation. Comprehensive support, preparations and development opportunities are provided to peer leaders to ensure their full participation and to realise the benefit of their contribution.

In-person and online community events. The project has delivered more than 20 community events for social connectors, the community and disability service providers to find out about the project, become engaged, stay informed and continuously learn together about the importance of social connection and belonging for people with intellectual disability.

Workshops, other learning opportunities (such as Lunch and Learn online training). Capacity building for social connectors, local community members and allies of people with intellectual disability to increase awareness of the possibilities for relationships with a person with intellectual disability, the importance of informal networks for supported decision making and advocacy and to respond to challenges and barriers in a proactive manner as they attempt to enact strategies for supporting relationship building.

Engaging people and connectors to become part of the project. Recruitment of people with intellectual disability and connectors takes time to build relationships and trust and overcome barriers. It is a complex and multi layered process, often taking months, involving repeated, intentional relational work. Part of this engagement involves finding solutions to administrative, attitudinal and organisational barriers and developing tailored strategies so that people with intellectual disability become part of the project.

Connections between a person with intellectual disability and social connectors. People with intellectual disability and social connectors are matched based on interests and other criteria. They spend time getting to know each other. Social connectors build bridges with mainstream community groups. The person with intellectual disability has opportunities to try new things, find out what they are interested in, become involved and known in their local community through connections and relationships with other people and contributions, such as volunteering, taking part in activities, events or playing a musical instrument in a group.

Facilitated opportunities. Throughout the project social connectors, other community members, including paid providers, are supported to identify and expand the informal social network and opportunities of a person with intellectual disability. The project team, person with intellectual disability, social connectors and providers meet to find ways of deepening relationships, plan and take action together to support community belonging with people with intellectual disability. This may include identifying existing relationships in people's lives (such as distant family, sibling relationships) that may have the potential to be strengthened. They plan ways to meet, with the person at the centre leading, to achieve greater connection and community inclusion.

Monthly Meet Ups (Community of Practice). The project established regular gatherings to facilitate learnings across the project and the two project sites. These meetings are in person. The Monthly Meet Ups are open to the social connectors and other community members interested in or already involved in the project. The purpose is to learn through reflective practice (social connectors sharing), sharing stories and lived experience guidance, to provide a platform for learning and connections across project and its parts.

Story creation and dissemination. The project develops stories of change (written, videos, photographs) to document the impact that is being achieved for the person with intellectual disability, social connectors, and the community. Stories of change are used across the other

activities (community engagement events, training, radio interviews, conferences and newsletters) to record evolving relationships of people with intellectual disability, to celebrate and recall meaningful events in their relationship journey - often the first of its kind in the person's life. Stories of change also demonstrate outcomes and promote the project in more authentic and effective ways.

Circles of Support. Circles are a facilitated and intentional way of strengthening the freely given relationships in a person's life. A circle of support is a group of people who gather regularly with a shared purpose of supporting the decisions, choices and direction of a person with intellectual disability at the centre. Circles aim to bring a range of diverse people together in an organised way – family, allies, friends and other community members – to support the focus person to act on their goals and dreams.

Circles of Support usually begin with the person's existing network. In Community for Everyone this work often starts 'from scratch'. Circles of Support start with identifying possible circle members, where social connectors take the first steps of building new relationships and inviting others into the person's life. This is a long term and complex process that involves ongoing efforts to connect with others in community settings around shared interest. It involves a constant questioning of who in those contexts may be able to offer more, noticing who shows warmth, openness and values that promote inclusion. It further involves a gradual process of facilitating the strengthening of connections and ongoing informal invitations. This could start with, for example, after event coffees and move over time to more formal invitations to consider being part of a circle of support. In each circle, for each potential member, the pace of strengthened engagement will vary. It should be noted that many valuable connections will never progress to circle membership and some may take years to form.

Research and evaluation. The project members work alongside university researchers to undertake and contribute to the evaluation of Community for Everyone.

Table 5 Community for Everyone project logic

Rationale/ aim	Stake-holders	Inputs	Processes	Activities	Output	Outcomes (short term)
To achieve social inclusion and belonging for profoundly isolated people with intellectual disability the project aims to enhance, ● Social networks, relationships ● Safety and advocacy support ● Community inclusion and sense of belonging	Profoundly isolated people with disability Volunteer social connectors Family, friends, neighbours, other people in persons' life Group home stakeholders Day program providers Project team SBSA and Hunter Circles Evaluation team Funders - DSS	DSS/ ILC funding Lived-experience expertise embedded in project Information, resources, existing relationships (group homes) Peer leaders/leadership training Matching and support to focus person and social connectors Capacity building training to social connectors Community of practice network of support Action research evaluation process	Codesign with lived experience leadership and expertise Community engagement events Coordination of socialising events and connections with the broader community for project participants and volunteer social connectors Capacity building events and activities for social connectors, other stakeholders, and peer leaders Community of practice of support for family, friends, social connectors to build shared learning and shared purpose	Recruit participants with disability Engage volunteer social connectors Develop and run tailored trainings and capacity building Provide organisation support – matching of pairs, socialising events, host and facilitate community of practice Reflective practice as part of the action learning approach, amend and change project based on feedback Document outcomes and work with evaluation team	**20 Information sessions** **20 profoundly isolated people with disability are** matched with volunteer connectors **20 people with disability experience** increased belonging, identity, agency, through the establishment of freely given relationships **20 volunteer social connectors** are trained and actively engaged in the focus person's life **Community of Practice meetings** are held regularly to engage and build capacity of social networks of people with disability	**Increased social connection** and relationships for people with disability who were profoundly isolated **Relationships btw connectors and people** are built on shared interests and values **Community of Practice** that creates a culture of person centered thinking, builds local knowledge, shares connections, tools, resources **Increased awareness and understanding** of the benefits of Circles of Support (people have more choice and decision support)