

NOT FOR PROFIT COLLABORATIVE INNOVATION FORUM: ENDING LONELINESS IN CANBERRA

2025

This report was prepared following a full-day collaborative innovation forum event held on 2 December 2025 at the University of Canberra



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Executive Summary

On 2 December 2025, more than 100 people from Canberra’s community sector, universities, government, philanthropy, start-ups and lived-experience networks met at the University of Canberra for the first Not-for-Profit Collaborative Innovation Forum, focused on ending loneliness in Canberra. The project was led by the Canberra Innovation Network, University of Canberra and Hands Across Canberra and developed through an extensive collaborative process with the ANU’s McCusker Institute, the Snow Foundation, Millhouse Ventures and Running for Resilience.

The forum launched a five-year effort to build innovation capability in the ACT not-for-profit sector. Ending loneliness was chosen as the first major theme.

Evidence from the Living Well in the ACT Region survey showed that loneliness in Canberra is common, patterned and strongly linked to low wellbeing, financial stress and

discrimination. People most affected include single parents, carers, people with disability, renters, younger adults, people living alone, LGBTQIA+ communities and recent arrivals. The research made it clear that loneliness is a structural social health issue, not a personal failing, and that quality of connection matters more than the number of interactions.

Speakers and panellists from mental health, social enterprise, lived experience and innovation reinforced this message. They highlighted the limits of short-term, treatment-style responses when causes are social and economic; the importance of mutual, ongoing relationships; and the need for community-led initiatives that feel safe, inclusive and practical. A provocation from the Foundation for Social Health drew on Mexico City's "Utopía" civic spaces to ask how Canberra's built and social environments could better support everyday belonging.

Throughout the day, participants experienced and reflected on models that already work in Canberra, including Running for Resilience, The Men's Table and university-based connection initiatives. Table discussions identified four big shifts: better public understanding of loneliness; deeper community ownership of solutions; more consistent, safe and accessible places for connection; and re-imagined social and physical environments that make it easy to meet and participate. Cross-cutting barriers such as cost of living, discrimination, caring responsibilities and lack of predictability were seen as central issues to address, not side concerns.

In the afternoon, an innovation workshop generated eight practical project concepts that could be advanced within 12 months, ranging from "Revitalise" community-led activation of empty spaces, to micro-grants for neighbourhood connection projects, to a Canberra-wide "Connection Coalition" and shared knowledge platform. Two start-ups—[Fundraiz.ai](#) and Dapple—showed how technology and social design can support connection and strengthen the community ecosystem.

Participants expressed strong support for continuing this work over several years and for keeping loneliness as a focus rather than treating the forum as a one-off event. Feedback rated the day highly, especially the mix of data, lived experience, movement-based activities and collaborative exercises, while asking for more time and structure for the innovation components and more diverse voices in future. Hands Across Canberra, CBRIN and the University of Canberra are committed to sharing this report, engaging government and partners, and building an ongoing program of collaborative action on loneliness and other major community issues.



Forum collaborators Ben Alexander (Running for Resilience), Meegan Fitzharris (University of Canberra), Michelle Cheah (ANU McCusker Institute), Craig Fairweather (Millhouse Ventures), Megan Parsons (Snow Foundation), Petr Adamek (Canberra Innovation Network) Genevieve Jacobs (Hands Across Canberra) and Abigirl Maminimini (Snow Foundation)

"This was a fantastic event that brought together people from across Canberra who might not normally meet to discuss a topic they are all passionate and committed to."

"Great mix of presentation of data, panel discussion with lived experience and networking opportunities. Also loved the walk to get out of the room."

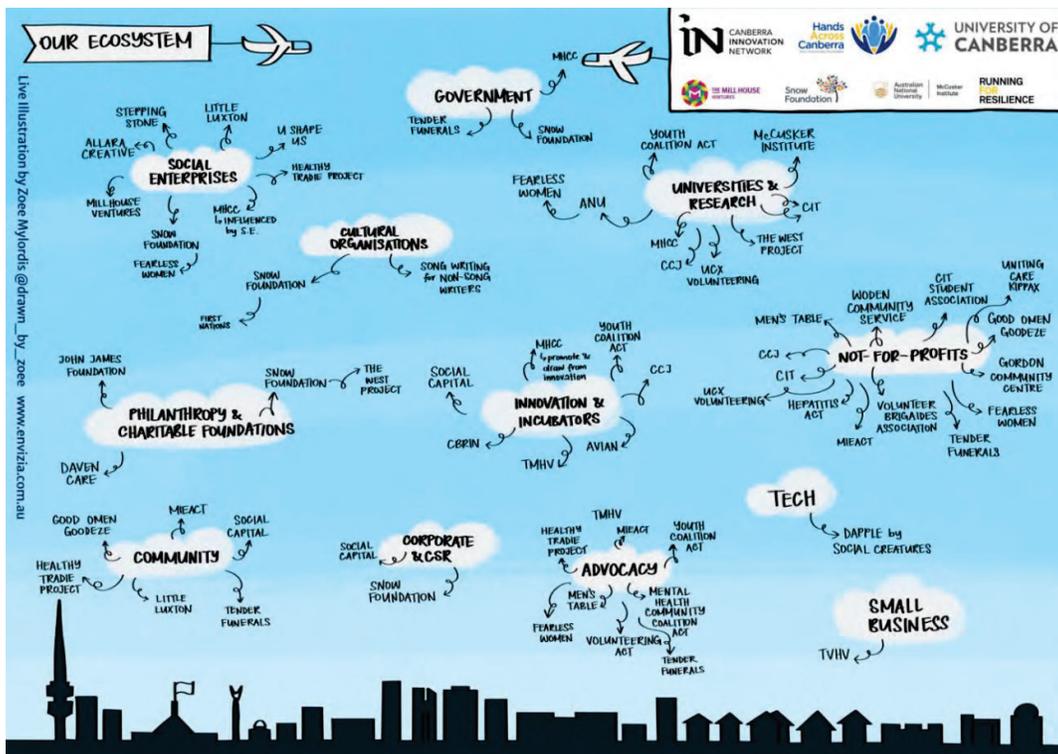
Purpose and Context

The Not-for-Profit Collaborative Innovation Forum: Ending Loneliness in Canberra was held on 2 December 2025 at the University of Canberra's Ann Harding Centre. Around 100 participants came from community organisations, research institutions, government, start-ups, tech and consulting firms, philanthropy and lived-experience networks.

The forum was co-hosted by Hands Across Canberra, the University of Canberra and the Canberra Innovation Network, with support from the Snow Foundation, Running for Resilience, the ANU McCusker Institute and Mill House Ventures. It is the first step in a five-year program to strengthen innovation capability in Canberra's not-for-profit sector, focusing each year on one major community challenge, with loneliness chosen as the starting theme.

The day aimed to:

- Build a shared understanding of loneliness in Canberra using current data and community insight.
- Highlight lived-experience and practical models already working in the community.
- Generate realistic ideas that could be advanced within 12 months, without assuming government funding as the only pathway.



Key Evidence and Insights on Loneliness

What the data shows

The Living Well in the ACT Region survey, presented by UC's Professor Jacki Schirmer, provided the evidence base for the forum. Key points included:

- Personal well-being in late 2024 was at its lowest level since the first pandemic lockdown, and strongly linked with chronic loneliness.
- Around 40% of ACT adults felt lonely at least sometimes, and more than one in ten experienced frequent loneliness.

- Groups at highest risk include single parents, people with disability, carers, unemployed people, renters, those living alone, younger adults, LGBTQIA+ communities and recent arrivals.

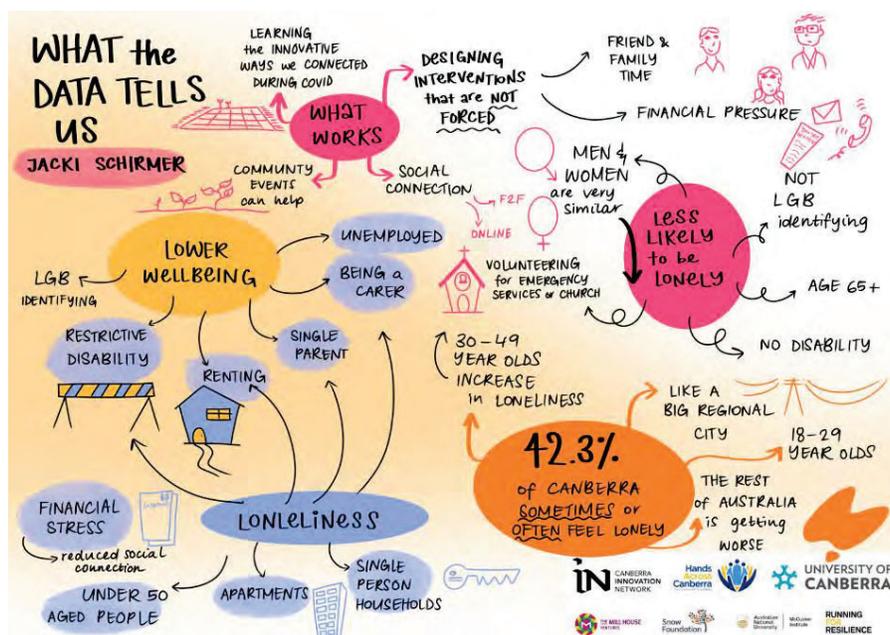
The analysis showed that six factors—confidence in the future, loneliness, physical health, psychological distress, belonging and financial stress—explain most of the variation in personal wellbeing. Financial stress, in particular, drives loneliness: people facing multiple financial pressures had very high loneliness rates, and many were cancelling social activities because of cost.

Patterns of connection were also nuanced:

- Rare face-to-face contact with family, friends or neighbours was linked with high loneliness, but frequent contact did not automatically create belonging.
- Online connection can support wellbeing when it involves real, meaningful relationships.^[1]
- People who spend more time than they want with others can still feel lonely, showing that fit and autonomy matter.

The evidence suggests that:

- Loneliness is a social health issue shaped by housing, affordability, discrimination, work patterns, community design and access to activities.
- Responses must focus on quality, safety and inclusion in relationships and spaces, not just more programs or more contact.



Voices from Practice and Lived Experience

Global and local framing

Melanie Wilde, CEO of the Foundation for Social Health, introduced the “Utopías” model from Mexico City: large, publicly owned spaces that integrate services, recreation, arts, learning, childcare and community connection. Loneliness can reflect how cities are designed—isolated housing, fragmented services, spaces prioritising movement over meeting—rather than individual failure. Could Canberra create similar accessible, multi-use spaces to make connection easy?

A panel including Lisa Kelly (Mental Health Community Coalition ACT), Joel Anderson (Foremind), Beth Garwood (MIEACT) and Vanessa Brettell (Stepping Stones) and chaired by Genevieve Jacobs (HAC) grounded the data in local realities. Shared themes emerged:



1. Loneliness and mental health are closely linked. Many people have unmet psychosocial needs, cycling through fragmented services without stable relationships.
2. Short-term, crisis-driven and treatment-style responses are not enough when the causes of loneliness are social, economic and environmental.
3. Peer-led, community-based and prevention-focused models create belonging more effectively than purely clinical or top-down programs.
4. Barriers like cost, transport, childcare and stigma prevent access, even when programs exist.

The panel reinforced that human relationships and mutual support are central to lasting change. Solutions must be co-designed with the community, respecting dignity, safety and choice.



What Participants Learned and Experienced

Table discussions: four big shifts

Guided discussions, supported by Michelle Cheah from ANU’s McCusker Institute, focused on four areas drawn from pre-forum survey themes. Participants concluded that Canberra needs several key shifts:

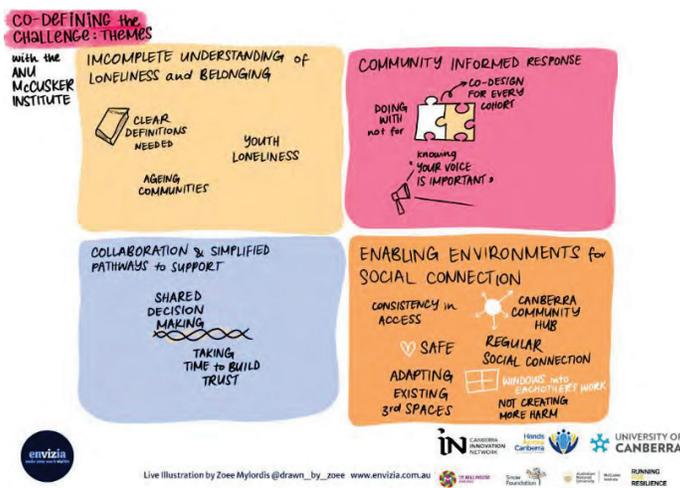
1. **Better understanding of loneliness and belonging**
 - Loneliness is not just social isolation, and people can feel lonely even when surrounded by others.
 - Public narratives often miss the experiences of younger people, renters, people with disability, LGBTQIA+ communities, carers and international students.
2. **Community-owned and community-informed responses**
 - Programs are more effective when designed and led with communities, not done to them.
 - People experiencing loneliness want to contribute, not only receive support.

3. Consistent, accessible and safe spaces for connection

- Predictable, ongoing activities with familiar faces build trust better than one-off events.
- Psychological safety is non-negotiable; people will not return to spaces where they feel judged or unsafe, online or offline.

4. Re-imagining Canberra’s social and built environment

- Many existing spaces—public, commercial and institutional—could be used more creatively for connection.
- Small, low-cost design changes and multi-purpose hubs can shift how people use their neighbourhoods and town centres.



Across all groups, several cross-cutting barriers were repeated: affordability, discrimination, caring responsibilities, predictability and the need for choice and autonomy in how people connect.

“A fantastic combination of speakers, collaborative activities, networking. Every speaker was great.”

“I really enjoyed all the sessions before lunch and found them informative and inspiring. The event overall was well designed and facilitated, and such a great initiative for a conversation that we haven't really had before as a sector.”

Practical Models in Action

Participants also experienced two working local models:

- **Running for Resilience (R4R):** a simple, weekly walk/run model that uses movement, routine and low-pressure conversation to build friendships and prevent crisis, founded by Ben Alexander. Research from Dr Joanna Tweedie shows that walking side-by-side lowers social pressure, regular meet-ups create habit, and shared activity fosters belonging.

- **The Men's Table SWARM activity:** a structured peer conversation format with Michael Collins and the Snow Foundation demonstrating how equal footing, turn-taking and listening without "fixing" can make it easier to share what is really going on. Even in a short mixed-group session, participants experienced how routine, confidentiality and clear rules can reduce loneliness, especially for men who avoid formal services.

These examples showed that effective interventions do not need to be complex or expensive; they need to be consistent, human-centred and easy to join.



"It is energising and invigorating to spend a day thinking intensely about an issue and allow connections that build innovative solutions"

Collaborative Projects and Ideas

In the afternoon, the Canberra Innovation Network facilitated a workshop asking: "What is one thing we could do together in the next 12 months that would make a real difference to mental health and loneliness in Canberra?" Mixed tables developed eight project concepts (*Appendix: Eight Group Projects Table*) plus heard two start-up pitches.

Illustrative project concepts

- **Revitalise:** community-driven renovation of under-used spaces (like empty shops or community rooms) to create local hubs for ongoing activities.
- **Our Campus: Faces and Places:** monthly potluck events at different parts of university campuses to reduce student loneliness and broaden networks.
- **Hood Hangs:** simple neighbourhood gatherings designed by residents after an initial supported event.
- **Canberra Community Connective / Connection Coalition:** a shared knowledge ecosystem and community of practice for organisations working on loneliness, to map services, share learning and coordinate action.
- **Friendship Makers Micro-grants:** small grants and mentoring for residents to start their own local connection activities.
- **Rolling dinners and civic values project:** recurring cross-organisation dinners and a city-wide conversation on shared values and identity.

Two start-ups, Fundraiz.ai and Dapple, presented tools aimed at strengthening the broader ecosystem—through better fundraising for charities and socially healthy planning tools for young people’s meet-ups.

These ideas share common features:

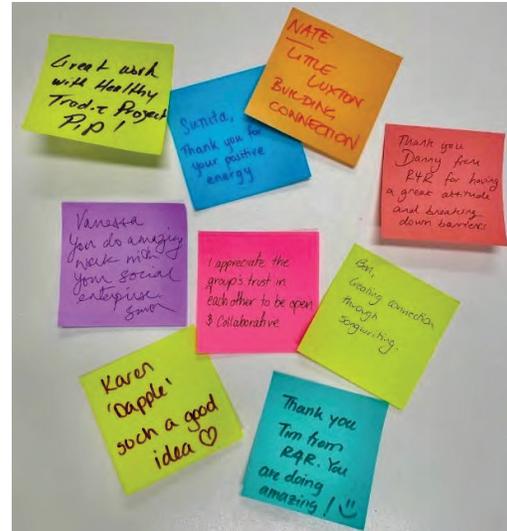
- Low or modest cost and focus on early wins.
- Emphasis on local ownership, repeatable formats and everyday participation rather than one-off flagship events.
- Potential to be tested quickly and scaled if they work

“This forum brought the right people into the room and made collaboration easy. We are already working with Vanessa from Stepping Stone on a Crafting for Resilience session that would not have happened without the event.”

“It was one of the most well organised events I’ve been to with a great variety of the types of activities and ways to engage with new people and it was all helped by excellent facilitators who were passionate, articulate and eloquent”.

Gratitude for Canberra's community sector

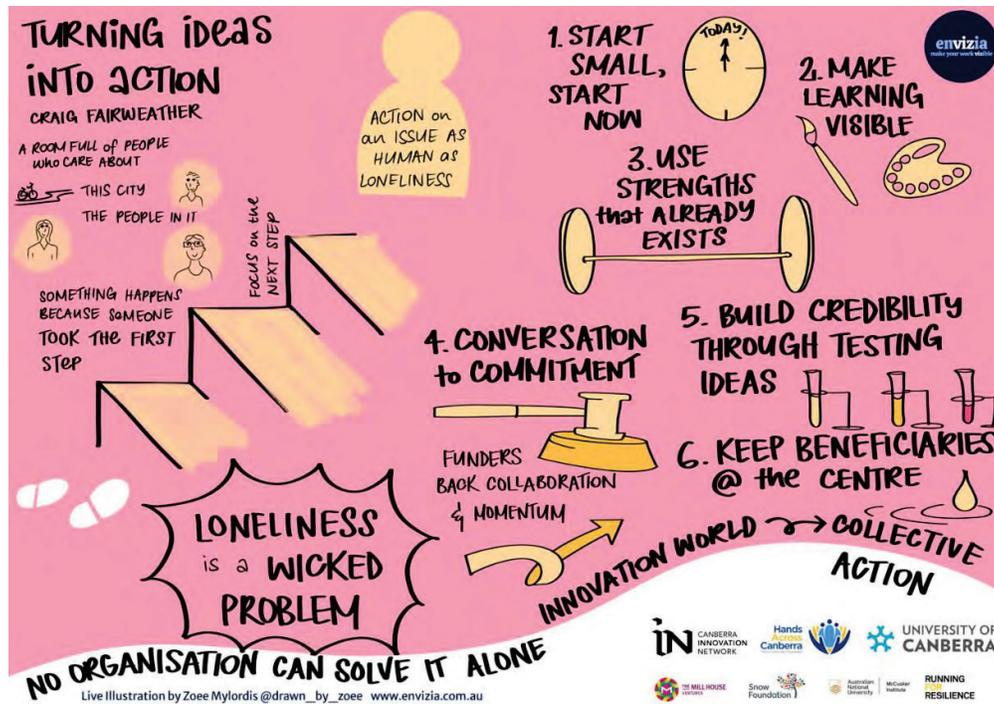
Led by the Snow Foundation, participants actively celebrated and thanked members of the community sector, noting that either as employees or volunteers, most go above and beyond in their commitment to building a better and fairer Canberra for the whole community.



How to Implement the Vision

Craig Fairweather from Millhouse Ventures outlined a roadmap for turning ideas into real impact:

- **Start small, start now:** Don't wait for perfect plans or full funding—begin with small, practical experiments that can grow.
- **Make learning visible:** Share what's being tested, what works, and what doesn't so others can learn and build on it.
- **Use existing strengths:** Map and leverage Canberra's current assets, relationships, and community resources instead of starting from scratch.
- **Move from talk to action:** Set clear next steps, timelines, and responsibilities to turn discussion into commitment.
- **Test to build credibility:** Pilot and measure small initiatives to prove impact and earn trust from partners and funders.
- **Keep people at the centre:** Ensure those experiencing loneliness guide decisions, design, and evaluation based on lived experience.



Feedback and Next Steps

What participants valued

Post-event feedback rated the forum from good to excellent, with most respondents saying it exceeded expectations. Participants particularly valued:

- The combination of strong data, lived-experience voices and practical examples.
- The opportunity to meet people they would not usually encounter and to build new collaborations.
- The variety of formats—presentations, panel, walk, SWARM activity, group work—that kept energy high.

What needs improvement

Participants also suggested:

- Clearer instructions and more time for the innovation and commitment sessions, with stronger scaffolding from “idea” to “doable action.”
- More deliberate inclusion of younger people, CALD communities, refugees, migrants and people with direct experience of loneliness.

- Continued attention to inclusive language, especially around LGBTQIA+ communities.

Commitments from collaborators

Hands Across Canberra, CBRIN and the University of Canberra committed to:

- Sharing this report with participants and partners
- Taking the findings to government to explore partnership opportunities.
- Continue working on a multi-year program that applies similar innovation methods to other key community challenges.
- Funding for one to two grants for projects arising from the forum in the annual Canberra Foundations Collaborative grant round.

Participants expressed a clear desire for follow-up sessions, communities of practice and practical prototyping opportunities, including micro-grants and case studies of successful collaboration.



"This forum was a genuinely valuable space for deep reflection and connection... one of the most impactful community-focused events I have attended."

"Great mix of motivation, information, engagement and sharing."

Core Messages

Across the forum, several core messages stood out:

- Loneliness in Canberra is widespread but solvable; it reflects systems, environments and costs of living more than individual flaws.
- Belonging grows from safe, predictable, community-led spaces and relationships, not from short-term or purely clinical responses. Canberra already holds many of the tools needed—data, committed organisations, practical models and community willingness—but progress depends on sustained, coordinated action over time.



"I've developed great ideas and connections born of the varied talks, panels and collaboration and connection exercises."

"Don't miss it! Great information, panels and collaborative exercises that have sparked a bunch of ideas and connections to take into the future."

Appendix: Eight Group Projects Table

| Project Name | Purpose / Problem | Method / Key Activities | Key Collaborators | Intended Outcomes |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|---|---|
| Revitalise | Underused or degraded community spaces limit local connection and purpose. | Community-led renovation of vacant or rundown sites; skill-building through hands-on work; conversion to shared hubs. | Local residents, building managers, architects, construction trades, Men's & Women's Sheds, Mill House-style mentors. | Activated community spaces; increased local pride; practical skill development; stronger neighbourhood connections. |
| Our Campus: Faces and Places | Student loneliness caused by silos between faculties and limited informal meetups. | Monthly potlucks hosted in different campus locations; spotlight on a new "face" or "place" each month. | Student unions, student services, faculty champions, alumni, food partners (Coles, Woolworths, OzHarvest, Foodbank). | Higher student belonging; cross-faculty friendships; awareness of more campus spaces and people. |
| Hood Hangs | People want to meet neighbours but lack simple ways to begin. | First event initiated by the project team; residents design their own follow-up gatherings (sports, cooking, picnics, etc.). | Local residents, volunteers, neighbourhood groups. | Neighbours know each other; organic local activities; easy-to-replicate model for other suburbs. |
| Canberra Community Connective | Organisations duplicate work and lack shared access to existing knowledge and resources. | Mapping of services/programs; platform for shared resources, insights, evaluations; coordination of alignment and partnerships. | NFPs, service providers, ACT Government, researchers, community groups. | Reduced duplication; stronger collaboration; improved program design; accessible shared knowledge base. |
| Canberra Connection Coalition | No unified city-wide agenda or network on loneliness and connection. | Community of practice with regular gatherings; shared agenda; information exchange; collaborative learning. | Anyone working on connection—community groups, government, researchers, service providers, advocates. | Coordinated sector; common understanding of loneliness; more effective system-wide action. |
| Friendship Makers Microgrants | Individuals have ideas to connect others but lack skills or seed funding. | Small grants for local activities; mini-bootcamps for event skills; mentoring from experienced community leaders. | Community mentors, microgrant providers, local venues, Running for Resilience network. | New hyper-local initiatives; empowered residents; many small-scale connection projects across Canberra. |
| Dinner | Valuable conversations from events often fade without follow-up. | Recreate workshop table discussions through recurring dinners hosted by participating organisations. | Any engaged organisation willing to host; existing networks of service providers and community groups. | Sustained cross-sector relationships; continuity of ideas; deeper collaboration. |
| Canberrans' Values and Virtues | Lack of shared civic identity can weaken cohesion and belonging. | Research-led city-wide values assessment; broad community engagement; creation of a values framework. | Universities, researchers, ACT Government, community organisations, residents. | Shared civic values; stronger identity; framework guiding programs, services, and community initiatives. |