



Policy Brief

# ***BUILDING BELONGING SOCIAL COHESION IN WESTERN SYDNEY***



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## THE HUMANITARIAN AND DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH INITIATIVE (HADRI)

The Humanitarian and Development Research Initiative (HADRI) at Western Sydney University investigates complex emergencies through a multidimensional lens that elucidates social, economic, political and health-related aspects of crises, highlighting connections with sustainable development interventions.

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# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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## 1 ESTABLISH LONG-TERM FUNDING FOR COMMUNITY-LED TRUST AND ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES

State and local governments should establish sustained funding models for community-led initiatives that strengthen trust, participation and intercultural engagement across Western Sydney.



## 2 INCREASE INVESTMENT IN CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

Governments should increase investment in cultural and community organisations across Western Sydney to strengthen local participation, outreach and social connection.



## 3 IMPROVE TRANSPORT ACCESSIBILITY AND AFFORDABILITY

Governments should improve transport accessibility and affordability across Western Sydney to reduce barriers to participation and inclusion.



## 4 STRENGTHEN ANTI-RACISM AND INCLUSION INITIATIVES IN SCHOOLS

The education sector should strengthen and expand anti-racism, inclusion, and intercultural engagement initiatives within schools.



## 5 DEVELOP LONG-TERM COMMUNITY LANGUAGE AND DIGITAL LITERACY PROGRAMS

Governments should invest in co-designed language and digital literacy programs that improve access to systems, services and civic participation.



## 6 PROMOTE CULTURALLY SAFE AND RESPONSIVE MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT AND RESPONSIBLE PUBLIC NARRATIVES

Governments and relevant institutions should strengthen culturally safe and responsive mental health support and promote responsible public narratives that reduce stigma, vilification and social division.



## 7 STRENGTHEN PLACE-BASED MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITY SERVICE HUBS

Governments should strengthen existing place-based, multicultural community service hubs and establish new accessible ones across Western Sydney.



## 8 REVIEW SETTLEMENT PROCESSES TO SUPPORT INTEGRATION AND INTERCULTURAL CONNECTION

Governments and settlement services organisations should review settlement processes and placement practices to strengthen integration and intercultural interaction across Western Sydney.



# AIMS OF THIS POLICY BRIEF

In April 2026, the Humanitarian and Development Research Initiative (HADRI) at Western Sydney University hosted and facilitated *Building Belonging: A community-based consultation on social cohesion in Western Sydney*. Participating organisations included: Evolve Housing Limited, Lebanese Muslim Association, Metro Assist, Multicultural NSW, Multicultural Youth Affairs Network NSW, NSW Police Force (Auburn and Bankstown Area Commands), Penrith City Council, SydWest Multicultural Services, Western Sydney Community Forum, and Western Sydney Local Health District.

Based on key points arising from the consultation, this Policy Brief considers the following questions:

- What is social cohesion in Western Sydney?
- What are the barriers to social cohesion in this area?
- What enables and promotes social cohesion among Western Sydney residents?

While this brief represents the discussion that was held, it should be noted that there are group-specific considerations — based on gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic level, and other factors — that typically affect cohesion, both in Western Sydney and in other areas. What is presented here engages with the above questions by advancing recommendations that address diversity, inclusion, participation, belonging and social relations, both at the vertical and horizontal dimensions of social cohesion.







# INTRODUCTION

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Western Sydney is one of the most dynamic and rapidly changing regions in Australia. Home to over half of Sydney's population and about 10% of Australia's population, the region has become a focal point for the nation's social, cultural and economic future. Spanning 13 local government areas — including some of Australia's fastest-growing communities such as Camden, Campbelltown, Penrith and Parramatta — Western Sydney continues to evolve as a place of extraordinary diversity, resilience and opportunity.

At the heart of Western Sydney's identity is its multicultural character. More than 40% of residents were born overseas, and nearly half speak a language other than English at home, with Arabic being the dominant one. Around 8.5% speak another language and English not well or not at all. Communities from almost 130 countries live across the region, speaking more than 100 languages and representing a rich mix of faiths, cultures and traditions. From major religious groups such as Catholics and Muslims, to Anglicans, Hindus and Buddhists, a diverse array of faiths comes together to shape the region's social fabric.

While many of these communities are largely Australian-born (including Arabic speakers, with about 50% of them born in Parramatta), Western Sydney is also one of Australia's major settlement destinations for migrants and refugees. The area is simultaneously home to the largest urban Indigenous population in the country. These overlapping histories, identities and experiences make the region a unique example of contemporary multicultural Australia.

Yet alongside this diversity are important questions about belonging, equity, participation and representation. As Western Sydney grows, so too does the need to ensure that institutions, policies and public narratives keep pace with the realities of its communities.

This policy brief emerges from that context. Grounded in the lived experiences and expertise of local organisations, it explores the barriers and enabling conditions shaping social cohesion in Western Sydney, and identifies community-informed policy directions to strengthen inclusion, trust and civic participation across the region.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All demographic data sourced from [Informed Decisions \(ID\) – Western Sydney \(LGA\)](#), based on 2021 Census data and subsequent estimates.

# SOCIAL COHESION IN WESTERN SYDNEY

Western Sydney's social cohesion is shaped by the extent to which communities can participate fully in social, civic and economic life. The *Building Belonging* consultation highlighted how barriers such as language exclusion, unequal access to services, discrimination, social isolation and limited trust in institutions continue to affect cohesion outcomes across the region. At the same time, locally grounded initiatives, cross-sector collaboration, community participation and culturally safe and inclusive approaches demonstrate strong potential to strengthen belonging, participation and trust.

The following recommendations outline **key policy directions** to support social cohesion in Western Sydney.



## 1 ESTABLISH LONG-TERM FUNDING FOR COMMUNITY-LED TRUST AND ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES

Trust between communities and institutions is a foundational condition for social cohesion. Ongoing barriers including language exclusion, limited institutional engagement, and weak community consultation contribute to low levels of trust and reduced participation in civic and community life. Community-led initiatives such as neighbourhood events, interfaith programs and direct engagement activities create opportunities for relationship-building, dialogue and mutual understanding across diverse communities.

Long-term and coordinated funding arrangements would strengthen the sustainability of these initiatives and support ongoing collaboration between community organisations, institutions and local communities.



## 2 INCREASE INVESTMENT IN CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

Cultural and community organisations play a central role in supporting social cohesion by providing culturally safe and responsive services, facilitating local engagement, and connecting communities to institutions and support networks. Uneven awareness of available services and community initiatives continues to limit participation among culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Improved funding models, enhanced coordination across local government areas, ongoing consultation with Western Sydney Community Forum and its stakeholders, and expanded partnership opportunities would improve community outreach, increase participation in local initiatives, and strengthen locally embedded support systems.



## 3 IMPROVE TRANSPORT ACCESSIBILITY AND AFFORDABILITY

Transport access is closely linked to social participation, employment, education and access to services. Cost-of-living pressures, limited transport accessibility, and difficulties navigating transport systems contribute to social isolation and reduced participation, particularly among migrant and refugee communities.

Targeted measures including expanded concession schemes, improved transport infrastructure, affordable driving lessons, and multilingual transport information would strengthen connectivity across communities and improve access to opportunities, services and community life.



## 4 STRENGTHEN ANTI-RACISM AND INCLUSION INITIATIVES IN SCHOOLS

Racism, discrimination and bullying undermine belonging and negatively affect social cohesion. Schools are important sites for promoting intercultural understanding, inclusion and positive relationships across communities. Strengthening existing anti-racism initiatives and establishing ongoing collaboration between schools, communities and government agencies would support safer and more inclusive educational environments.



Regular engagement mechanisms, including annual roundtables with state government actors and ongoing dialogue between schools and communities, would support stronger institutional relationships and improve responsiveness to community concerns<sup>2</sup>.



## 5 DEVELOP LONG-TERM COMMUNITY LANGUAGE AND DIGITAL LITERACY PROGRAMS

Language and communication barriers remain significant constraints on social cohesion in Western Sydney. Limited English proficiency, lack of multilingual support, and low digital literacy reduce access to information, services, employment pathways and civic participation.

Long-term community-based programs that are tailored to local needs and developed collaboratively by community organisations would improve confidence in navigating systems and increase participation in social and civic life. Improved language and digital literacy would also strengthen access to services and enhance community inclusion<sup>3</sup>.



## 6 PROMOTE CULTURALLY SAFE AND RESPONSIVE MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT AND RESPONSIBLE PUBLIC NARRATIVES

Global conflicts, harmful public discourse, and divisive media narratives can negatively affect mental health, increase social tension and weaken social cohesion. Communities experiencing discrimination and stigma are more likely to experience isolation, reduced participation and diminished trust in institutions.

Culturally competent mental health services, alongside stronger accountability in public communication and media representation, can support community wellbeing and reduce harmful narratives that contribute to division and exclusion.

<sup>2</sup> For targeted policy recommendations on anti-racism in Western Sydney, see the Centre for Western Sydney and Western Sydney Community Forum's issue paper on [Advancing Anti-Racism in Western Sydney: Towards a regional anti-racism framework](#) (2024).

<sup>3</sup> For data on digital inclusion in Western Sydney, see the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society's report on [Uncovering the Digital Divide in the Western Parkland City: Findings Report for Western Parkland City Digital Equity and Inclusion Program](#) (2023) and the Whitlam Institute, Centre for Western Sydney and Westerly's report on [Digital Equity & Education: A NSW case study](#) (2024).



## 7 STRENGTHEN PLACE-BASED MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITY SERVICE HUBS

Limited awareness of services, language barriers, and difficulties navigating support systems continue to restrict access to assistance for many communities. Integrated community service hubs offer culturally safe and responsive support and can be managed through a collaboration between different service providers, including local authorities. This improves accessibility and strengthens connections between communities and institutions.

Both new and existing services need to include language and cultural support, mental health support, domestic and family violence services, disability services, and alcohol and drug support, amongst other forms of assistance. Locating these hubs within accessible community settings and in areas without current infrastructure can bolster early intervention, improve awareness of available support, and contribute to stronger institutional trust.



## 8 REVIEW SETTLEMENT PROCESSES TO SUPPORT INTEGRATION AND INTERCULTURAL CONNECTION

Settlement systems play a significant role in shaping long-term social cohesion outcomes. Concentrated settlement patterns can limit opportunities for interaction across communities and contribute to social fragmentation.

Settlement approaches that support broader intercultural engagement, local participation, and connection both across communities and with existing kinship networks would strengthen belonging, reduce isolation and improve long-term integration outcomes. While elements of these approaches are reflected in current practice, a more comprehensive policy framework should be developed to foster meaningful exchange and connection between newly settled individuals and the broader community. Supporting stronger interaction between groups is critical to building shared understanding and social cohesion across Western Sydney.





# CONCLUSIONS

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Strengthening social cohesion in Western Sydney requires coordinated policy responses that improve inclusion, participation, trust and access across diverse communities. This includes sustained investment in community-led engagement initiatives, stronger support for cultural and community organisations, improved transport accessibility, and expanded anti-racism and inclusion initiatives. Long-term language and digital literacy programs, culturally responsive mental health supports, and more responsible public narratives are also critical to ensuring that all communities can participate fully and equitably in social and civic life.

Place-based approaches that improve access to services and strengthen relationships between communities and institutions can play an important role in supporting belonging and reducing exclusion. At the same time, settlement processes and integration policies must create greater opportunities for intercultural connection and participation across Western Sydney. Together, these policy directions provide a framework that contributes to building a more inclusive, connected and cohesive region that recognises diversity as a social and civic strength.

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