

# THINK SOCIAL COHESION

Convening partners



Summit architect



Media partner



NATIONAL SUMMIT REPORT

## Building the conditions for belonging, participation and trust

Parramatta · 28 July 2026

# → Contents

|                                |    |     |                                                                                         |    |
|--------------------------------|----|-----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Executive Summary              | 3  | 5   | Voices and issues requiring further attention                                           | 19 |
| 1 About the Summit             | 5  | 6   | From discussion to action: Recommendations                                              | 20 |
| 2 What We Heard                | 6  | 6.1 | Establish rights and institutional responsibility as the foundation for social cohesion | 20 |
| 3 Five Priorities for Action   | 8  | 6.2 | Build the infrastructure of reach                                                       | 21 |
| 3.1 Rights and responsibility  | 8  | 6.3 | Make participation real                                                                 | 22 |
| 3.2 Reach                      | 9  | 6.4 | Make accountability visible                                                             | 23 |
| 3.3 Participation              | 11 | 6.5 | Address the architecture of the information environment                                 | 24 |
| 3.4 Accountability             | 13 | 6.6 | Build the Roadmap through partnership rather than consultation                          | 25 |
| 3.5 Narrative                  | 14 | 7   | What Happens Next                                                                       | 26 |
| 4 Emerging Issues and Tensions | 16 |     |                                                                                         |    |

## → Executive Summary

The Think Social Cohesion National Summit was convened by SydWest, SSI and SCOA at a time of heightened concern about the pressures affecting belonging, trust and participation in Australia. The Summit emerged from the recognition that these pressures do not sit neatly within sector or policy boundaries: housing, employment, education, safety, racism, public narratives and confidence in institutions intersect in shaping whether people feel they belong and are able to participate. The purpose of the Summit was therefore not simply to diagnose these challenges, but to bring community, government, policy, research and institutional perspectives into a shared conversation about what Australia needs to strengthen social cohesion.

One hundred and sixty invited leaders participated in a full day of keynotes, panels and facilitated contributions. Across the day, the discussion moved from identifying what is not working towards a more practical consideration of what should change, who has responsibility and how progress should be demonstrated. In the earlier sessions, participants were more likely to describe problems and gaps; by the afternoon, a much greater proportion of contributions were proposing mechanisms, including pathways, local initiatives, leadership development, measurement, employer responsibility and stronger community infrastructure.

The overarching conclusion was that Australia does not lack ideas; it lacks a sufficiently shared and accountable framework for action. The Summit

also challenged any framing of social cohesion as principally a problem for migrant or multicultural communities to solve. A strong proposition emerging from both participants and speakers was that social cohesion belongs to all Australians and is fundamental to the strength of our democracy, institutions, economy and communities. At the same time, the discussion made clear that legal and policy frameworks alone are not enough; social cohesion is also built through the places, relationships and opportunities that bring people into meaningful contact and participation.

Five interconnected priorities emerged as a framework for the work ahead. **Rights and responsibility** asks what the system must guarantee, including clear rights, enforceable obligations and accountable institutions. **Reach** asks who existing institutions and initiatives are failing to reach, and places greater emphasis on neighbourhoods, workplaces, schools, local government and community spaces. **Participation** recognises economic, civic and community contribution as central to belonging, including the recognition of overseas qualifications and removal of barriers to meaningful employment and participation. **Accountability** asks who owns the outcome and whether people can see what changed because they contributed. **Narrative** asks what national story can support cohesion, including the role of truth-telling, multiculturalism, political leadership, media and the wider information environment.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY CONTINUED

From these discussions, several principal directions for action emerge. Australia should strengthen the rights and institutional responsibilities that provide the foundation for cohesion, while also investing in the local and place-based infrastructure of reach. Greater priority should be given to meaningful participation, particularly recognition of overseas skills and qualifications and pathways that enable people to contribute their capabilities. The Summit also points to the need to address the structural dimensions of the information environment rather than relying only on better communication or awareness campaigns, alongside stronger approaches to ethical storytelling and public narrative.

Most importantly, future action must be accompanied by visible accountability. Participants repeatedly raised concern about consultation that produces no discernible consequence. In the closing session, participants proposed a more concrete accountability model; each Roadmap commitment should identify an accountable leader, a lived-

experience partner, the resources required, a baseline, a six-month measure and a transparent method for reporting progress. This provides an important test for the work that follows; commitments without ownership, resources and measurement risk remaining aspirations rather than becoming a genuine roadmap for change.

The Summit is therefore a starting point rather than an endpoint. The emerging framework must now be refined, tested and translated into clear actions, ownership and measures, while addressing areas that received insufficient attention during the day, including disability, First Nations perspectives, young people, regional and rural Australia, smaller faith communities and material economic conditions. The convening partners also have a responsibility to demonstrate that participation in the Summit had consequence; the consolidated record calls for delegates to be told what changed because of their contribution and for commitments to be tracked through the Social Cohesion Roadmap at six months.

SECTION 1

## → About the Summit

The Think Social Cohesion National Summit was held on 28 July 2026 at Business Western Sydney, 4 Parramatta Square, Parramatta. It was convened by SydWest, SSI and SCOA, with SBS as media partner.

The Summit brought together 160 invited leaders for a full day of discussion focused on the conditions that strengthen or weaken social cohesion in Australia, and on what should be built, changed or strengthened in response. The program combined keynote and framing addresses with five panel discussions structured around questions of system responsibility, community experience, practical action, public narrative and commitment.

Participant input was captured throughout the day through Mentimeter, with contributions processed during sessions and surfaced to facilitators

as the discussion progressed. These contributions were subsequently analysed alongside keynote, framing and panel contributions to identify recurring themes, areas of convergence, unresolved questions and points of disagreement.

This report does not suggest that every participant held the same view or that the Summit produced consensus on every issue. Rather, it reflects the patterns that emerged across the day, the positions that were reinforced from more than one direction, and the tensions and questions that remained unresolved. The final version of the Summit record deliberately moved away from describing the outcomes as a 'strong consensus', instead recognising that five recurring priorities emerged while important disagreements remained.

## SECTION 2

## → What We Heard

The Summit began with a strong diagnosis of the pressures impacting social cohesion. Across the early discussions, participants spoke about racism and discrimination, unequal access to opportunity, declining trust in institutions, divisive public narratives and the difficulty of creating meaningful connection across difference. The contributions were weighted heavily towards identifying gaps rather than describing what was already working. The Summit record interprets this not simply as dissatisfaction, but as evidence that the sector has a much more developed language for identifying problems than for articulating and demonstrating success.

As the day progressed, however, the conversation began to shift from diagnosis to mechanisms. Participants increasingly moved beyond describing exclusion or calling broadly for greater inclusion and identified practical ways in which cohesion might be strengthened. The discussion encompassed legal and institutional mechanisms, but also the importance of place, proximity and relationships; local government, neighbourhood organisations, workplaces, schools, libraries and other community spaces all have a role in creating opportunities for participation and meaningful contact. Economic participation also emerged as part of this picture, with recognition of overseas skills and qualifications the most consistently supported specific proposition across the Summit.

This shift also exposed an important tension. Some of the challenges identified during the day were structural, while many of the proposed responses remained informational, educational or narrative-based. This was particularly apparent in discussions about media and the information environment. Participants and speakers identified the role of algorithms, platform design and commercial incentives in amplifying outrage and division, while proposed responses frequently returned to awareness campaigns, education and media literacy. The Summit therefore raised a harder question: where the causes of division are structural, are the responses sufficiently structural too?

The conversation also moved from mechanisms to responsibility. Throughout much of the day, participants were clear about what governments, institutions, employers, media and other systems should do, but responsibility for delivery was often less explicit. The record identifies this as a recurring feature of the discussion: many contributions articulated what the system should provide without identifying a specific duty bearer or owner. By the final session, this began to change. Participants started to frame commitments in terms of what their own organisations could do and to ask more directly what institutions in the room were prepared to own, fund and deliver.

## 2. WHAT WE HEARD CONTINUED

That movement led to perhaps the most important shift of the day: from responsibility to accountability. Participants repeatedly questioned forms of consultation in which communities contribute their experience and expertise but cannot subsequently see what changed as a result. In the closing discussion, this concern became much more concrete. Participants proposed that commitments should have an accountable leader, a lived-experience partner, identified resources, a baseline, a six-month measure and a transparent method for reporting progress. The discussion had therefore moved beyond asking *what should happen* to asking *who will own it, how will we know it happened, and how will communities know their participation made a difference?*

The Summit did not resolve every question, nor did participants agree on every approach. Important tensions remained around the balance between rights and relationships, community bonds and connection across communities, specialist and mainstream responsibility, and how Australia should navigate difficult questions of speech, naming, identity and disagreement. Rather than diminishing the value of the Summit, these

unresolved questions are part of what the conversation revealed. They reinforce the need for a Social Cohesion Roadmap that does not simply describe shared aspirations but is capable of holding disagreement while translating areas of convergence into practical action.

Taken as a whole, the journey of the day was therefore one from diagnosis to mechanisms to responsibility and finally accountability. The challenge emerging from the Summit is not simply to identify what Australia values or what is placing cohesion under pressure. It is to translate those insights into action that reaches beyond those already engaged, assigns responsibility, invests in participation and connection, and makes progress visible. That progression provides the foundation for the five priorities that follow:

- rights and responsibility
- reach
- participation
- accountability
- narrative.

## SECTION 3 • FIVE PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

## → 3.1 Rights and responsibility

**What must the system guarantee?**

A strong proposition emerging from the Summit was that social cohesion cannot rest on goodwill, aspiration or generic statements of values alone. Participants repeatedly reached for the language of rights, duties and institutional responsibility. In the first panel, participant contributions called for some form of legal or rights-based instrument, making this one of the strongest responses in that discussion.

This reflected a distinction between saying what Australia values and establishing what people should be able to expect from its institutions. Principles such as fairness, dignity, belonging and respect remain important, but the discussion repeatedly returned to the question of what happens when those principles are not upheld. The emerging proposition was that rights require corresponding responsibilities; if people are to be protected from discrimination and able to participate fully, responsibility cannot rest primarily with individuals or communities experiencing exclusion. Governments, employers and institutions also need clearly defined obligations.

Racism brought this question into particularly sharp focus. The Summit identified a positive duty on employers to prevent racism as one of the more concrete proposals emerging from the day. Rather than relying only on individuals to respond after harm has occurred, a positive-duty approach would place responsibility on institutions to take preventative

action. The discussion connected this to existing precedent in other areas of law and regulation such as gender equality.

At the same time, the Summit did not suggest that legislation alone would create social cohesion. One contribution explicitly challenged a predominantly legislative response, and the wider discussion repeatedly returned to relationships, proximity, participation and the everyday places in which belonging is built. The emerging direction was therefore not law instead of relationships, but a stronger rights-based foundation accompanied by the social and institutional conditions that enable those rights to be experienced in practice.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION**

- Move from values to clearer guarantees: establish more clearly the rights people should be able to rely on and the institutions responsible for upholding them.
- Strengthen preventative institutional responsibility: explore enforceable and positive duties, including approaches that require institutions and employers to prevent racism rather than relying solely on responses after harm occurs.
- Connect rights with lived experience: treat legal and institutional protections as a foundation for social cohesion, while recognising that belonging also depends on participation, relationships and meaningful connection in everyday life.

## SECTION 3 • FIVE PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

## → 3.2 Reach

**Who are we failing to reach?**

One of the clearest developments across the Summit was a shift from talking about connection to asking the harder question of reach. The distinction matters. Connection can describe relationships among people who are already participating; reach asks who existing institutions, programs and forms of engagement do not touch. The question of how to reach people who have disengaged or 'opted out' arose independently across four sessions, making it one of the most persistent unresolved questions of the day.

The discussion suggested that strengthening social cohesion requires moving beyond the people and organisations already participating in multicultural, settlement, community and civic structures. This includes people who have become disengaged from institutions or public processes, as well as those for whom existing engagement mechanisms may never have been meaningful or accessible. Importantly, the Summit distinguished between people who actively disengage and people whom systems have simply failed to reach. The challenge is therefore not only how to encourage participation, but whether institutions themselves need to change where, how and through whom they engage.

This placed greater emphasis on the local infrastructure of social cohesion. Local government, neighbourhood organisations, libraries and other community spaces were identified as part of the everyday infrastructure through which people encounter institutions and one another. The Summit pointed to councils, neighbourhood houses, libraries, local media, micro-grants and other place-based mechanisms as practical ways of strengthening connection and participation. Local government was also explicitly identified, reflecting its role in reaching people through the places in which they live their daily lives.

The conversation extended beyond traditional community settings. Workplaces and schools, alongside neighbourhood and community infrastructure, emerged as important sites in which cohesion is experienced and built. These are places where people who may never attend a formal community consultation or multicultural event nevertheless encounter difference as part of everyday life. The discussion therefore pointed towards the value of creating opportunities for meaningful contact across difference, rather than relying only on campaigns or formal engagement processes. It also highlighted the importance of accessible 'third spaces'; places outside the home and formal institutions where people can meet, participate and build relationships through shared activity.

3. FIVE PRIORITIES FOR ACTION **CONTINUED**

The Summit also surfaced an important tension between bonding and bridging. Strong relationships within cultural, faith and other communities can provide belonging, support and social infrastructure. At the same time, participants raised the need for opportunities to build relationships across communities and across difference. These perspectives were not fully reconciled during the Summit. The discussion explicitly cautioned against treating community concentration as inherently opposed to cohesion, while also recognising the importance of creating opportunities for wider connection.

The emerging priority is therefore not simply to create more opportunities for people to connect. It is to examine who is absent, who is disengaged, who is repeatedly missed, and whether the institutions seeking to engage them are using the right mechanisms in the right places. Reach shifts some of the responsibility away from asking why people do not participate and towards asking what governments, institutions and organisations must do differently to reach them.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION**

- Design for those not already engaged: assess who existing programs, consultations and institutions are failing to reach, distinguishing between active disengagement and systemic failure to reach particular people and communities.
- Invest in the places where cohesion happens: strengthen the role of local government and neighbourhood infrastructure, including community organisations, libraries and other accessible third spaces, while recognising workplaces and schools as important everyday sites of contact and participation.
- Create meaningful contact across difference: support opportunities that build relationships beyond existing networks without diminishing the value of strong relationships and belonging within communities.

## SECTION 3 • FIVE PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

## → 3.3 Participation

## How do people contribute?

A strong thread through the Summit was that social cohesion is shaped not only by whether people feel welcomed or connected, but by whether they have genuine opportunities to participate and contribute. This moves the conversation beyond inclusion as access to services and towards the conditions that enable people to use their skills, experience, knowledge and leadership. The Summit identified recognition of overseas skills and qualifications as the strongest evidenced specific proposition of the day, raised across five sessions without a recorded contradiction.

The significance of skills recognition extends beyond employment. When qualifications, professional experience and capabilities are not recognised or cannot be readily translated into opportunity, the consequences affect economic security, independence, confidence and the ability to participate fully in Australian life. The discussion therefore positioned employment and economic participation as part of the social cohesion agenda, rather than as separate policy concerns. Entrepreneurship was also raised as a pathway through which people contribute their capabilities and create

opportunity. The broader proposition is important: people should be understood not simply through what support they may require, but through what they are capable of contributing.

This perspective also supports a shift towards pathways rather than services: moving away from disconnected service responses towards pathways that enable people to progress, participate and exercise agency. For settlement, this is particularly relevant. Effective settlement should not be understood only in terms of services received, but in whether people are able to convert their existing capabilities and aspirations into economic, social and civic participation.

Participation is also broader than paid employment. Across the Summit, discussion encompassed opportunities for people to contribute through community and civic leadership, local institutions and decision-making. This matters because social cohesion is strengthened when people are not simply consulted about decisions that affect them, but have opportunities to exercise agency, shape institutions and contribute to the communities and country of which they are part. Participation, in this sense, is both an outcome of belonging and one of the ways belonging is created.

3. FIVE PRIORITIES FOR ACTION **CONTINUED**

Concurrently, the Summit identified an important limitation in the discussion. While economic participation was prominent, the room gave considerably less attention to the material conditions that can enable or constrain participation, including housing, wages, unemployment, insecure work, hiring discrimination and cost-of-living pressures. These issues were raised more strongly by afternoon speakers than through participant contributions. The discussion cautioned that a social cohesion agenda focused heavily on narrative and connection, without sufficient attention to material conditions, risks overlooking some of the structural pressures shaping people's capacity to participate.

The emerging priority is therefore to understand participation not as something people must first demonstrate in order to belong, but as something institutions must make genuinely possible. For the settlement system, this reinforces an approach that starts from capability as well as need; recognising what people bring, removing barriers that prevent those

capabilities being used, and creating pathways into economic, community and civic life.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION**

- Remove barriers to using existing capability: prioritise more effective recognition of overseas skills and qualifications and strengthen pathways into meaningful employment, entrepreneurship and economic participation.
- Build pathways to participation, not disconnected services: design systems around people's progression, agency and capacity to contribute, including opportunities for community and civic leadership.
- Address the conditions that shape participation: ensure the social cohesion agenda considers material and structural barriers including housing, employment conditions and economic security, alongside belonging, connection and narrative.

## SECTION 3 • FIVE PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

## → 3.4 Accountability

## Who owns the outcome?

Perhaps the strongest challenge emerging from the Summit was the need to move from consultation to accountability. Across the day, participants questioned what happens after communities, people with lived experience and sector organisations are invited to contribute their knowledge. Concern about consultation without consequence appeared across five sessions: people may be asked to speak, participate or provide advice, but too often cannot see what changed because they did so. The Summit therefore pushed beyond the quality of consultation itself to a more demanding question: who is responsible for acting on what is heard?

This points to a distinction between consultation and partnership. Listening is important, but participation becomes more meaningful when people can influence decisions and see a connection between their contribution and the outcome. Lived experience should therefore not sit alongside implementation as an occasional source of advice; the model proposed from the floor placed a lived-experience partner alongside the accountable leader for each commitment. This shifts the relationship from being consulted about change towards having a role in shaping and assessing it.

The final session gave this principle a particularly concrete form. Participants proposed that every commitment should identify one accountable leader, one lived-experience partner, the resources required, a baseline, a six-month measure and a transparent method of reporting progress. This was one of the clearest operational propositions to emerge from the Summit. It transformed accountability from a broad aspiration into an architecture that could be applied to each commitment in a future Social Cohesion Roadmap.

This matters because the Summit itself exposed the gap between commitment and ownership. By the closing session, participants were explicitly questioning whether the conversation had remained too general and asking what those in the room were actually prepared to commit to.

Accountability also requires visible consequence. The test is not simply whether a consultation occurred, a commitment was announced or an initiative was established, but whether there is evidence of what changed. Baselines and measures make progress assessable; resources demonstrate that responsibility has been matched by capacity to act; named ownership makes clear who is answerable for delivery; and transparent reporting allows communities and institutions to see whether commitments have been met. The Summit record captures the principle succinctly: A commitment without ownership, resources and measurement is an intention, not a roadmap.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION

- Give every commitment an accountability architecture: identify a named accountable leader, lived-experience partner, required resources, baseline, six-month measure and transparent reporting mechanism.
- Move from consultation towards partnership and visible consequence: people who contribute should be able to see what changed, what did not change and how their input influenced decisions.
- Apply the accountability test to the Roadmap itself: convert emerging priorities into specific commitments with ownership, resources, measures and timeframes, and report transparently on progress.

## SECTION 3 • FIVE PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

## → 3.5 Narrative

## What story enables all of this?

Narrative was one of the most prominent themes across the Summit. Participants and speakers repeatedly returned to the stories Australia tells about itself, about multiculturalism, about who belongs and about whose contribution is recognised. The discussion suggested that social cohesion is shaped not only by policies and institutions, but also by the national story within which those policies operate: whether difference is presented as a source of strength or division, whether people can see themselves as part of a shared future, and whether public narratives create the conditions for participation and belonging. The Summit highlighted narrative as the theme with the greatest volume of discussion, while also identifying it as one of the least specific areas in terms of what should practically change.

Multiculturalism was an important part of this conversation, but the Summit also exposed a tension that should not be concealed. One strong proposition was that social cohesion must be understood as the responsibility of all Australians, rather than as a problem located within migrant or multicultural communities. At the same time, participants and speakers emphasised the importance of multiculturalism to Australia's identity and institutional architecture. These positions are not necessarily the same: one seeks to decouple social cohesion from being treated principally as a multicultural issue, while the other seeks to embed multiculturalism more firmly within Australia's national story. The Summit did not fully resolve that tension.

The discussion also connected the national story to truth-telling and political leadership. A cohesive national narrative cannot depend on avoiding difficult histories, experiences or disagreements. The conversations raised questions about how racism is named, whose experiences are heard and how institutions respond when issues are contested. Political and institutional leadership matters in this context because leaders help establish the boundaries of public discourse; what can be acknowledged, what is legitimised and whether difficult conversations can occur without communities being positioned against one another. The Summit did not settle all of these questions; tensions around naming, open dialogue, safety and disagreement remained live at the end of the day.

Importantly, the later sessions moved the conversation beyond simply asking for 'better stories'. Panel 4 identified structural features of the contemporary information environment, including algorithmic optimisation towards outrage, commercial incentives and platform design that can amplify division and pit communities against one another. Yet many proposed responses remained focused on awareness, information, education and media literacy. The record identifies this mismatch between a structural diagnosis and an informational remedy as one of the clearest findings from the afternoon discussion. If the architecture through which stories circulate contributes to polarisation, changing the content of the stories alone will not address the underlying mechanism.

3. FIVE PRIORITIES FOR ACTION **CONTINUED**

This brings media, digital platforms and algorithms firmly into the social cohesion conversation. The Summit identified digital duty of care as one potential structural response. More broadly, the discussion pointed to the need to consider not only what is communicated, but the systems that determine what people see, what is amplified and what forms of content are rewarded.

Alongside these structural questions, the Summit produced a practical proposition around ethical storytelling; a protocol built from participant contributions incorporating informed and continuing consent, cultural safety, co-authorship, fair recognition and the right to review or withdraw. Unlike many of the larger systemic questions discussed during the day, this was identified as an action that organisations could begin implementing without waiting for new legislation or funding.

The emerging challenge is therefore broader than finding more positive ways to talk about social cohesion. It is to create a national story capable of holding multiculturalism, shared belonging, truth and legitimate disagreement, while also addressing the institutional, political and

technological conditions through which that story is produced and circulated. Narrative can help enable cohesion, but it cannot substitute for the rights, reach, participation and accountability required to make that story credible.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION**

- Strengthen an inclusive national story: support a narrative of belonging and contribution that recognises Australia's multicultural character while making clear that responsibility for social cohesion belongs to all Australians.
- Address the architecture as well as the message: complement better storytelling and media literacy with attention to political leadership, media responsibility, platform design, algorithms and other structural drivers of polarisation.
- Embed ethical storytelling in practice: develop and apply approaches based on continuing consent, cultural safety, co-authorship, fair recognition and the ability of people whose experiences are shared to review or withdraw their participation.

## SECTION 4

## → Emerging Issues and Tensions

**4.1 Social cohesion belongs to everyone**

A strong proposition emerging from the Summit challenged the idea that social cohesion is principally something multicultural communities are responsible for producing or protecting. The discussion instead positioned cohesion as a whole-of-society responsibility: one that belongs to governments, institutions, employers, media, communities and individuals across Australia. This was one of the summit's most defensible reframes, noting that the proposition was raised independently across multiple sessions and reinforced by presenters on the stage.

At the same time, this created an unresolved tension about the place of multiculturalism within the social cohesion agenda. One position sought to separate social cohesion from being framed primarily as a migration or multicultural issue, while another emphasised multiculturalism as an essential part of Australia's national identity and institutional framework. The Summit did not resolve that tension.

The challenge for the work ahead is therefore to hold both propositions: to recognise and strengthen Australia's multicultural character and the contribution of culturally diverse communities, while making clear that the responsibility for social cohesion cannot be placed on those communities alone. Social cohesion is a national responsibility, and the institutions with the greatest power to shape participation, opportunity, public discourse and belonging must also be accountable for creating the conditions in which it can flourish.

**4.2 Rights are necessary, but relationships matter**

The Summit strongly supported the importance of rights, standards and institutional responsibility, including calls for legal and regulatory mechanisms capable of establishing clearer duties. At the same time, the discussion cautioned against treating legislation as a complete response to social cohesion. One contribution explicitly challenged an overly legislative approach, while other contributions pointed towards the importance of relationships, place and meaningful contact in shaping whether people experience belonging in their everyday lives.

This exposed an important tension between establishing a universal basis of rights and creating the conditions in which cohesion is actually lived. Law can establish standards, protections and responsibilities, but it does not by itself build trust, relationships or connection between people. Nor does it necessarily reach those who are disengaged from institutions or outside established multicultural and community-sector networks. This is why the Summit's later focus on reach was significant; the discussion increasingly turned towards the places and relationships through which people encounter one another in daily life.

Local government, neighbourhood organisations, libraries and other community spaces were identified as part of this infrastructure, alongside opportunities for meaningful contact across difference. The record therefore points towards a both/and rather than either/or proposition: rights and enforceable responsibilities can provide an essential foundation, while relationships and place-based infrastructure help translate those principles into lived experience.

4. EMERGING ISSUES AND TENSIONS **CONTINUED**

The unresolved question is how Australia connects these two levels of action. A stronger rights framework without mechanisms for reach and relationship risks remaining distant from everyday experience; investment in connection without clear rights and institutional responsibility risks placing too much of the burden for cohesion on communities themselves. The Summit suggests that an effective approach will need to hold institutional obligation and relational infrastructure together, rather than expecting either to do the work alone.

**4.3 Bridging and bonding**

The Summit surfaced an important tension between bridging across difference and strengthening bonds within communities. One line of discussion emphasised the need for more opportunities for people from different backgrounds to meet, build relationships and develop shared understanding. This supported the wider focus on meaningful contact, local places and ‘third spaces’ as part of the infrastructure through which social cohesion can be strengthened.

A different perspective challenged any assumption that strong cultural, faith or community networks are themselves a barrier to cohesion. From this perspective, community concentration and strong internal relationships can be valuable social infrastructure, providing belonging, support, identity and networks through which people participate in wider society. The discussions were explicit that these positions are not simply reconcilable and should not be smoothed into an artificial consensus.

The tension matters because an emphasis on ‘bridging’ can inadvertently imply that strong community bonds are a problem to be overcome. Conversely, strong bonds within communities do not automatically create

relationships across communities or with institutions. The question is therefore not whether Australia should choose between bonding or bridging, but how policy and practice can recognise the value of strong community networks while also creating genuine opportunities for contact and participation across difference.

This leaves an important question for the Roadmap: how can Australia strengthen connection across communities without weakening, pathologising or placing responsibility on the community networks that already provide belonging and support? The Summit did not resolve that question, and this should be preserved as an area requiring further consideration.

**4.4 Narrative versus material conditions**

The Summit gave substantial attention to the role of public narrative, media and the information environment in shaping social cohesion. How people and communities are represented, what stories are amplified and how public debate is conducted all affect perceptions of belonging, trust and difference. Narrative was one of the most prominent themes across the day.

Simultaneously, there were significant gaps in the discussion. Housing, wages, unemployment, insecure work, hiring discrimination and cost-of-living pressures received comparatively little attention from participants, despite the ways material conditions can affect people's capacity to participate and their experience of Australian institutions. These issues were more strongly foregrounded by speakers later in the day than in contributions from the room.

## 4. EMERGING ISSUES AND TENSIONS CONTINUED

This creates an important tension for a Roadmap. Social cohesion cannot be reduced to the quality of Australia's public conversation if people are also experiencing material barriers to security, opportunity and participation. A strategy built primarily around narrative risks becoming a strategy about narrative in a country under material pressure.

The implication is not that narrative matters less, but that narrative and material conditions need to be considered together. Better stories about belonging will have limited credibility if people's lived experience is characterised by exclusion from employment, economic insecurity or difficulty meeting basic needs. Equally, addressing material conditions alone does not resolve racism, polarisation or harmful public narratives.

The unresolved question is therefore how a national social cohesion agenda gives appropriate weight to both: the stories that shape how Australians understand one another and the material conditions that shape whether people can participate, contribute and experience a genuine sense of security and belonging.

### 4.5 Open dialogue, safety and disagreement

The Summit surfaced a difficult and unresolved question about how Australia creates space for honest disagreement while maintaining safety, dignity and protection from hate. Participants and speakers raised concerns about both the consequences of harmful and discriminatory speech and the risk that people may withdraw from public conversation when they believe particular issues cannot be discussed openly.

Discussions identified this as a genuine tension between censorship and open dialogue, and between naming and not naming difficult issues; it did not resolve the tension in favour of one position.

This matters because social cohesion cannot depend on the absence of disagreement. A cohesive society will still contain profound differences in experience, identity, belief and political perspective. The challenge raised by the Summit is how institutions and public forums can enable those differences to be expressed and contested without disagreement becoming dehumanisation, racism or hate, while also avoiding approaches that make people feel legitimate questions or experiences cannot be voiced.

Discussion of the Middle East brought this tension into particularly sharp focus. Discussions captured disagreement about who is able to speak, who is perceived to be silenced, and whose experiences are recognised in public discussion of conflict. These perspectives were contested and the Summit did not produce a common position.

The significance for a Roadmap is therefore not to determine which position in these contested debates prevailed. It is to recognise that the capacity to navigate disagreement is itself part of the infrastructure of social cohesion. Safety cannot mean eliminating difficult conversations, just as open dialogue cannot provide permission for hate or discrimination.

The unresolved question is how Australia creates institutions, leadership and public spaces capable of holding both safety and open dialogue: protecting people from racism, hate and dehumanisation while preserving the possibility of legitimate disagreement, difficult conversations and competing perspectives. The Summit did not provide an answer, but it made clear that avoiding the question will not resolve it.

## SECTION 5

→ **Voices and issues requiring further attention**

The Summit also exposed areas where the national conversation needs to broaden and deepen. These should not be read as gaps in the wider social cohesion sector or as evidence that work is not already occurring. Rather, they are issues and perspectives that were absent, lightly represented or insufficiently explored during this Summit. Identifying them is important because the next phase of a Social Cohesion Roadmap should not simply reproduce the boundaries of the conversation held on the day.

First Nations knowledge and leadership require much greater attention. Any continuing national conversation about belonging, identity, place and Australia's national story needs to create appropriate space for First Nations knowledge and leadership rather than treating it as peripheral to the social cohesion agenda.

Disability was also substantially under-represented. Disability was raised from the stage late in the Summit. A Roadmap process therefore needs more deliberate engagement with people with disability and disability organisations about the conditions that enable or constrain belonging, participation and access to institutions.

The experiences and perspectives of young people, and of people living in regional and rural Australia, also require deeper exploration. Their inclusion matters because the conditions shaping cohesion are not experienced uniformly across generations or places, and a national Roadmap will need to reach beyond the perspectives represented in a single metropolitan summit.

The Summit also needs to be complemented by a stronger examination of material and economic conditions. While overseas skills recognition was one of the most consistently supported propositions of the day, the room gave

comparatively little attention to housing, wages, unemployment, insecure work, hiring discrimination and cost-of-living pressures. A social cohesion strategy centred on narrative must adequately consider the material pressures that shape people's capacity to participate and their relationship with institutions.

The position of smaller faith communities remains another open question. There is a need to consider how smaller faith communities can be included when they may lack the institutional infrastructure, resources or representation available to larger organisations. This raises a broader question for a Roadmap about whose voices established engagement mechanisms are able to reach and whose perspectives may remain less visible.

Finally, evidence and measurement require substantially greater development. The Summit identified measurement as an area requiring further attention, while the closing discussion simultaneously made measurement central to the proposed accountability architecture. Participants called for commitments to be accompanied by baselines, six-month measures and transparent reporting. The next phase therefore needs to ask not only what Australia should do to strengthen cohesion, but what evidence will demonstrate whether conditions are changing, for whom, and over what period.

These areas should inform the next stage of a Roadmap rather than be treated as an addendum to it. Broadening participation, strengthening the evidence base and deliberately seeking perspectives that were less visible during the Summit will be important to ensuring that the emerging framework becomes more representative and more robust as it develops, without overstating what the Summit itself established.

## SECTION 6 • FROM DISCUSSION TO ACTION: RECOMMENDATIONS

## → 6.1 Establish rights and institutional responsibility as the foundation for social cohesion

The Summit strongly supported moving beyond statements of shared values towards clearer rights, responsibilities and institutional obligations. Calls for a legal or rights-based instrument were among the strongest clusters of contributions in the early discussion, reflecting a view that social cohesion requires a foundation that defines what people should be able to expect and who is responsible for upholding those expectations.

A rights-based approach would establish a common base of protection and responsibility, rather than leaving the experience of fairness, dignity and freedom from discrimination dependent on institutional goodwill. The Summit identified a rights instrument as one proposition arising from the day, alongside calls for clearer institutional accountability. At the same time, the discussion did not settle the precise form that such an instrument should take.

Racism provides a particularly concrete area for further action. The Summit surfaced a proposal for a positive duty on employers to prevent racism, shifting responsibility from responding only after discrimination occurs towards requiring preventative action.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION**

Progress work on a stronger rights and institutional responsibility framework for social cohesion, including consideration of appropriate human rights architecture and enforceable duties. As part of this work, examine the case for a positive duty to prevent racial discrimination, including how responsibility should apply across employers and other institutions. Any legislative response should be developed alongside, rather than as a substitute for, the relational and place-based approaches to cohesion identified through the Summit.

## SECTION 6 • FROM DISCUSSION TO ACTION: RECOMMENDATIONS

→ **6.2 Build the infrastructure of reach**

The Summit identified reach as a critical challenge for social cohesion: not simply how to strengthen connection among people already participating, but how to reach those whom existing institutions, programs and engagement mechanisms do not touch. The question of how to reach people who have disengaged or 'opted out' arose independently across four sessions. This was sufficiently significant that a Roadmap should deliberately move from 'connection' to 'reach', sharpening the focus on who is currently being missed.

The discussion pointed towards the importance of local and place-based infrastructure. The Summit identified councils, neighbourhood houses, libraries, local media, micro-grants and other community settings as practical mechanisms for building participation and connection. Local government was explicitly identified, recognising the role of institutions close to people's everyday lives in reaching beyond formal consultation and established multicultural-sector networks.

The wider Summit discussion also highlighted schools, workplaces and other everyday or 'third' spaces as important settings for social cohesion. Their significance is that they create opportunities for contact and participation outside formal multicultural or community-sector structures. Investment in reach should therefore focus not simply on creating more

engagement activities, but on strengthening the places, relationships and locally led mechanisms through which people who are not already engaged can participate.

Importantly, the Summit cautioned against assuming that people who are not participating have simply chosen to disengage. Some may have opted out, while others may not have been effectively reached by existing systems at all. Building the infrastructure of reach therefore requires institutions to examine their own methods, relationships and accessibility, rather than placing responsibility solely on individuals or communities to engage.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION**

Invest in and strengthen the local infrastructure of reach, including local government, neighbourhood and community organisations, libraries, schools, workplaces, third spaces and locally led initiatives. Use this infrastructure deliberately to create meaningful opportunities for participation and contact across difference, with particular attention to people and communities not reached through existing institutional and multicultural-sector networks.

## SECTION 6 • FROM DISCUSSION TO ACTION: RECOMMENDATIONS

→ **6.3 Make participation real**

The Summit positioned participation as central to social cohesion. Belonging is not only about being welcomed or connected; it is also about whether people have genuine opportunities to use their skills, contribute economically and socially, exercise agency and participate in the institutions and communities around them.

The clearest and most consistently supported action in this area was recognition of overseas skills and qualifications. The discussion identified this as the strongest evidenced specific proposition of the Summit: it was raised across five sessions and no contradictory position was recorded. This gives skills recognition particular weight as a practical priority arising from the day.

The discussion also connected participation with employment, entrepreneurship and pathways that enable people to contribute their capabilities. The Summit captured a shift towards 'pathways rather than services', an approach focused on enabling progression and participation rather than treating people primarily as recipients of support. This is particularly important in the settlement context: people arrive with existing skills, experience, aspirations and capabilities, even where they may also require support to navigate unfamiliar systems.

Participation should also extend beyond economic contribution. The Summit discussion encompassed community and civic leadership, agency and involvement in decision-making. A stronger social cohesion agenda

should create opportunities for people not only to access institutions, but to contribute to and shape them. This also connects participation to the Summit's wider call for partnership rather than consultation without visible consequence.

The Summit nevertheless cautioned against considering participation separately from the material conditions that make it possible. Housing, wages, unemployment, insecure work, hiring discrimination and cost-of-living pressures were comparatively underdeveloped in participant discussion, despite their potential significance for people's ability to participate. These issues therefore require further examination as a Roadmap develops rather than being presented as settled findings of the Summit.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION**

Prioritise practical pathways that enable people to use and contribute their capabilities, beginning with stronger recognition of overseas skills and qualifications and pathways to meaningful employment and entrepreneurship. Extend the participation agenda to community and civic leadership and opportunities to influence decision-making, while ensuring that the material and structural barriers that can restrict participation are examined as a Roadmap develops.

## SECTION 6 • FROM DISCUSSION TO ACTION: RECOMMENDATIONS

→ **6.4 Make accountability visible**

The Summit identified accountability as the bridge between commitment and action. Across five sessions, participants raised concerns about consultation that does not produce visible consequence: people and communities contribute their experience, expertise and time, but may not subsequently know what changed, who acted or whether their contribution influenced a decision. The emerging challenge was therefore not simply to consult more effectively, but to make responsibility for outcomes explicit.

The closing discussion provided one of the Summit's most concrete proposals for addressing this problem. Participants proposed that each Roadmap commitment should identify one accountable leader, one lived-experience partner, the resources required, a baseline, a six-month measure and a transparent method for reporting progress. This gives an emerging Roadmap a practical accountability architecture rather than leaving accountability as a general principle.

This approach also strengthens the shift from consultation towards partnership. Identifying a lived-experience partner alongside the accountable leader creates a role for people affected by an issue in shaping and assessing the response, rather than limiting their involvement to providing input at the beginning of a process. Naming an accountable

leader, meanwhile, makes clear where responsibility for implementation sits.

Resources, baselines and measures are equally important. A commitment cannot be meaningfully assessed if there is no starting point against which progress can be judged, no resources attached to delivery and no agreed indication of what change should look like. Transparent reporting then creates the mechanism through which participants, communities and the wider public can see whether commitments have translated into action. A commitment without ownership, resources and measurement is an intention, not a roadmap.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION**

Apply a consistent accountability framework to every commitment included in a Social Cohesion Roadmap. Each commitment should identify a named accountable owner, lived-experience partner, required resources, baseline, measure of progress, timeframe and transparent reporting mechanism. Progress should be reported back to participants and stakeholders so that people can see what changed, what remains outstanding and who is responsible for the next step.

## SECTION 6 • FROM DISCUSSION TO ACTION: RECOMMENDATIONS

→ **6.5 Address the architecture of the information environment**

The Summit gave significant attention to the role of media, public narrative and the digital information environment in shaping social cohesion. Importantly, the later discussion moved beyond concern about negative or divisive stories to examine the systems through which those stories are produced, amplified and rewarded. Discussions identified algorithmic optimisation towards outrage, commercial incentives and platform design that can pit communities against one another, as part of this structural diagnosis.

This distinction matters because many of the responses proposed during the day remained focused on awareness, information, education and media literacy. These may have value, but highlight a clear gap between the structural nature of the problem being described and the largely informational remedies that were proposed. If digital systems create incentives for polarising or inflammatory content, simply producing more positive stories does not address the architecture determining what is amplified, rewarded or seen.

A more comprehensive response therefore needs to consider platform incentives, algorithmic amplification and media responsibility, alongside the quality of public communication itself. The Summit also surfaced digital duty of care as a possible structural mechanism. This should be treated as a proposition raised during the Summit rather than presented at this stage as an agreed or verified legislative development.

The Summit also produced a practical proposition around ethical storytelling. Participant contributions were synthesised into a potential protocol incorporating informed and continuing consent, cultural safety, co-authorship, fair recognition and the right to review or withdraw. This was identified as one of the clearest practical actions arising from the discussion because organisations could begin applying these principles without waiting for legislation or additional funding.

The emerging direction is therefore broader than a call to ‘tell better stories.’ Social cohesion requires attention both to the narratives circulating through Australian public life and to the political, commercial and technological systems that determine how those narratives travel and which voices receive prominence.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION**

Develop a more structural response to the information environment that examines platform incentives, algorithmic amplification, appropriate digital regulation and media responsibility, alongside investment in media literacy and constructive public narrative. In parallel, develop and promote an ethical storytelling framework grounded in continuing consent, cultural safety, co-authorship, fair recognition and the right to review or withdraw.

## SECTION 6 • FROM DISCUSSION TO ACTION: RECOMMENDATIONS

## → 6.6 Build the Roadmap through partnership rather than consultation

The Summit's own process creates an important test for what happens next. Participants repeatedly raised concern about consultation without consequence: people contribute their time, expertise and lived experience, but are not always able to see how their contribution influenced decisions. If a Social Cohesion Roadmap is to respond credibly to that challenge, its development should demonstrate a different model; one in which participation continues beyond the Summit and people can see how their input has shaped the outcome.

This is particularly important because the five emerging priorities should not be presented as having been fully endorsed or ratified by the Summit. It is therefore recommended that the priorities be returned to all participants in writing and that an opportunity be provided to amend or respond to them.

The next stage should also deliberately broaden participation. The Summit identified perspectives and issues that were absent or insufficiently explored, including First Nations knowledge and leadership, disability, young people, regional and rural Australia, material and economic conditions, and evidence and measurement. Smaller faith communities also remain an explicit open question. Developing a Roadmap provides an opportunity to engage these perspectives more deliberately rather than allowing the limits of one day's conversation to become the limits of the national framework.

Crucially, participants should also be able to see what changed because they participated. The Summit explicitly called for every delegate to be told what changed because of their contribution and for commitments to be tracked through a Social Cohesion Roadmap at the six-month point. These are not simply administrative follow-ups; they provide an immediate opportunity to demonstrate the visible consequence and accountability that participants called for throughout the day.

A Roadmap should therefore be understood as a next stage of partnership, rather than a finished product emerging from the Summit. Returning the priorities to participants, showing how feedback changes the framework, bringing underrepresented perspectives into its development and reporting publicly on progress would help turn the Summit from a consultation event into an ongoing process of shared responsibility and accountability.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION**

Return the emerging priorities to Summit participants for further consideration and amendment, clearly showing what has changed as a result of their contributions. Broaden the next phase to include perspectives insufficiently represented or explored at the Summit and establish a transparent accountability process through which Roadmap commitments, ownership and progress are reviewed and reported at the six-month point.

## SECTION 7

## → What Happens Next

The Summit was intended to move the conversation on social cohesion towards action. The immediate task is therefore to take the emerging framework developed through the day and turn it into a Social Cohesion Roadmap with clear commitments, ownership and measures of progress.

The first step is to refine and test the five emerging priorities; Rights and Responsibility, Reach, Participation, Accountability and Narrative, with Summit participants. Returning them to participants provides an opportunity to test whether they accurately reflect the discussion, identify what is missing or overstated, and demonstrate how participant feedback has shaped the final framework.

Following feedback from the convening partners, the Roadmap has been refined to identify one proposed action under each of the five priorities, drawing on the recommendations outlined in Section 6. These priorities and actions will be tested through a consultation process commencing at the FECCA Conference on 16 October 2026, where participants will have the opportunity to contribute through facilitated discussion and a survey. From 19 October 2026, the survey will be circulated more broadly to Summit participants and the convening partners' networks to invite further input.

The Roadmap will clearly distinguish between the findings and priorities that emerged from the Summit and the actions subsequently developed through consultation, preserving the integrity of this report as a record of the day's discussions. Once finalised, the Roadmap will be provided to the Royal Commission and government to inform ongoing policy development and action on social cohesion.

The next phase should also broaden the voices informing the Roadmap. Further engagement should deliberately address perspectives and issues that were absent or insufficiently explored during the Summit, including First Nations

knowledge and leadership, disability, young people, regional and rural Australia, material and economic conditions, and evidence and measurement. The record also identifies the inclusion of smaller faith communities as an open question requiring further consideration. Alongside the open consultation, a short targeted written process will seek these perspectives directly.

A Roadmap should then convert priorities into specific, accountable commitments. The model proposed by participants provides a practical starting point: each commitment should identify an accountable owner, a lived-experience partner, the resources required, a baseline, a measure of progress and a transparent reporting mechanism. This will enable a Roadmap to distinguish between aspirations and actions and make clear who is responsible for taking each commitment forward.

Finally, the process must close the accountability loop with participants. The Summit action register commits to telling delegates what changed because they contributed and to tracking commitments through the Social Cohesion Roadmap at the six-month point. The six-month check should therefore be used to report transparently on what has progressed, what has not, what has been learned and what needs to happen next. As the Roadmap will be finalised later than originally anticipated, the convening partners have agreed to conduct the six-month accountability review from the date of its publication, rather than the Summit itself. This will allow sufficient time for commitments to be implemented and for progress to be meaningfully assessed.

The measure of the Summit's success will ultimately not be the publication of this report or a Roadmap itself. It will be whether the conversation produces visible consequence; whether priorities become owned commitments, whether participation changes decisions, and whether progress can be demonstrated over time.

# THINK SOCIAL COHESION

Think Social Cohesion National Summit, 28 July 2026, Business Western Sydney, Parramatta.  
Convened by SydWest, SSI and SCOA, with SBS as media partner. Summit architect: Just Gold.

## Convening partners



## Summit architect



## Media partner

