

# Influencing social change in Australia



For nearly 200 years, The Benevolent Society has pioneered new solutions to societal problems and promoted positive social change to alleviate disadvantage.

Our purpose is to create caring and inclusive communities and a just society. We currently provide services to individuals and communities across New South Wales and in Queensland, frequently acting as advocates on behalf of individuals in need.



We also recognise that overcoming social and economic disadvantage requires advocating for more fundamental systemic changes.

Our expertise in providing services, our involvement with individuals and communities experiencing disadvantage, and our expanding program of research and evaluation, put us in a strong position to contribute to debates on social issues and to public policy decision-making.

We do this by

- listening to our clients and the communities in which we work, and giving a voice to marginalised people
- documenting, evaluating and improving our own services
- increasing the evidence base about what works
- conducting research into key social issues, often in partnership with other organisations
- developing alliances with organisations that share our concerns
- building networks of leaders through social leadership programs
- promoting increased understanding of societal issues and the causes of disadvantage
- developing and putting forward policy solutions to governments and opinion leaders.





We have identified twelve key and interconnected issues which can be barriers to social and economic inclusion. Of these, four are our current areas of focus: promoting healthy early childhood, ageing well, community safety and the role of non-profit organisations as agents of social change.

### **1. The health and social inclusion of young children**

Every child has the right to a good start in life. A healthy and safe childhood starts with a loving family and a connected community, where children and their families have opportunities to learn and grow. Children and their families also need access to adequate incomes, secure housing and support services. The wellbeing and social inclusion of children is a national priority and the responsibility of us all.



### **2. Ageing well and social inclusion of older people**

Wellbeing in older age means ensuring that older people can lead full and meaningful lives and participate in community life, whatever their stage of life or state of health. The ageing of the population requires new approaches to retirement and older age, as well as ensuring that older people have access to high quality health and care services when needed. It means recognising the contributions that older people make to the community, enabling them to live as independently as possible, with dignity and autonomy and connected to those around them.



### **3. Community safety and domestic violence**

All people have the right to live safely, free from violence. This right is breached daily. One in three Australian women experience domestic violence during their lives while one in five are sexually abused. Governments, business and non profit organisations, communities and individuals, all have an obligation to work together to prevent and respond to violence against women.

### **4. Leadership, democracy and the role of non profit organisations in social change**

Non profit organisations are essential in a healthy democracy. They provide a platform for diverse views to be heard and for individuals and

communities to participate in public life. While Australia is a prosperous, thriving democracy, there are significant numbers of citizens who are economically, socially and politically excluded. Non-profit organisations can play a leadership role in strengthening our democracy through promoting participation and by working to reduce disadvantage.

### **5. Secure and affordable housing**

A place to call home is an essential part of life. It provides a secure environment where we can grow and develop, go to school, maintain employment, raise children, grow old and be part of a community. An increasing number of Australians, however, are struggling to find or stay in affordable, secure and adequate housing.

### **6. Mental health**

Mental health problems can affect people of all ages and backgrounds, often leading to isolation and discrimination. Strong, supportive community environments, mental health promotion, early diagnosis of problems and appropriate treatment are critical for reducing the impact of mental illness. People with mental health problems need support to participate in community life, such as through employment, education and volunteering opportunities.

### **7. Access to transport**

Being able to easily get from one place to another is an essential part of daily life, and is a key to social and economic opportunity. On the other hand, poor access to transport compromises people's access to employment, education and health services and contributes to social exclusion. Affordable and accessible transport is a crucial component in building productive, inclusive and sustainable communities.

### **8. Environment and the impact of climate change**

Climate change will have a profound effect in Australia and globally. Responding to climate change is an urgent priority for governments, business and communities so that we leave the social and physical environment in a fit state for future generations. However, the steps we take must not further entrench disadvantage for those who can least afford to pay.

### **9. Social and economic inclusion of Indigenous people**

Harsh injustices since colonisation and successive government policies have resulted in entrenched social and economic exclusion among Indigenous Australians. Reconciliation between all Australians means promoting the economic, political, and social inclusion of Indigenous Australians. It means upholding the rights, needs, views and aspirations of Indigenous Australians, ensuring they have equitable access to resources and services, and opportunities for full participation in the community.

### **10. Income and economic participation**

Around two million Australians currently live in poverty and the current global financial crisis could put even greater pressure on those who are already struggling. The impact of poverty often goes beyond financial hardship, excluding people from the workforce, education and aspects of community life. If we are to build a strong economy and strengthen community wellbeing, it is essential that all Australians receive the support they need to participate in the economic and social life of our country.

### **11. Cultural and ethnic diversity**

Australia is one of the most culturally diverse societies in the world. Some migrants and refugees, however, face barriers in finding a place to live, getting a job, accessing support services and in dealing with isolation, discrimination and prejudice. If we are to continue to build strong and socially inclusive communities, it is vital that people of all backgrounds have the support and respect to build positive and productive lives and participate fully in the community.

### **12. Geographic aspects of social and economic inclusion**

Where we live matters. Neighbourhoods shape our lives in fundamental ways, including the quality of our education, employment, health and relationships. While most communities are positive places to live, some are characterised by significant and multiple forms of disadvantage: few jobs, inadequate housing and poor access to education, transport and health services. Governments have primary responsibility for tackling the structural inequalities which lead to neighbourhood disadvantage. Communities also need to be directly involved in developing solutions to the challenges they face.



## Social and economic inclusion

Vulnerable individuals, families and communities can be faced with a wide range of difficult issues which affect their wellbeing and their social and economic participation. This is sometimes referred to as social exclusion.

Social exclusion is a *'shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown'* (UK Social Exclusion Unit).

A social exclusion approach is helpful in looking at the complexity of these issues and the ways in which they interact to create disadvantage. It is based on recent research and thinking into better ways of understanding the causes and nature of disadvantage.

By promoting social inclusion, we hope to develop more effective ways of tackling disadvantage and creating caring and inclusive communities and a just society.

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The Benevolent Society is Australia's oldest charity. Since 1813, we have identified major social challenges and worked to meet them head on. A secular organisation, we aim to tackle social inequality by building caring and inclusive communities. We deliver leading edge programs and services, find innovative solutions to complex social challenges and advocate for a more just society. Our strength lies in our expertise across the lifespan, delivering services for women, children and families, older people, community based and respite care, community development and social leadership programs.