**Challenge justifications**

**Civic participation for a more resilient, cohesive democracy.**

Gather is an app and associated website that increases civic participation through encouraging adults to engage with community events and measure the impact on their sense of connectedness and belonging. In particular, Gather allows for users to become more involved in active community discussions and monitors improvements to people’s sense of belonging. It also increases the opportunities for people to utilise digital and physical civic infrastructure, through using the app, and attending events at a wide variety of locations, including community based, privately owned, and local, state, and federal government sites.

The simple, intuitive design of the Gather app uses simple graphics to replace potentially judgemental descriptive language and increases the accessibility of the app, alongside a page-reader and maps that include accessibility information. Gather can be rolled out in local communities with the support of LGA governments, and can be modified to include local accessibility data to best support users from that community. It is easily integrated into the local government website, and downloaded for all major phone operating systems.

There are many sources that contribute to the theoretical underpinnings of how the Gather app and website can increase civic participation. Civic engagement as a concept is correlated with social connectedness (<https://scanloninstitute.org.au/mapping-social-cohesion-2021/>), and civic engagement activities such as voter turnout is positively associated with social inclusion (<https://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/research/files/voter-turnout-2016.pdf>). Therefore, efforts to increase social connectedness by local, state, and federal bodies are likely to improve community engagement with these different levels of government.

Social connectedness can be measured using *four indicators* (<https://www.regionalwellbeing.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Living-well-in-the-ACT-region2022.pdf>); *sense of social connection measured by frequency of time spent with or talking with family, friends and neighbours,* (<https://bcec.edu.au/assets/2021/11/139532_BCEC-Stronger-Together-report_WEB.pdf>) *loneliness* (<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/australias-welfare-2023-data-insights/data>), *volunteering rates* (<https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Volunteering-Australia-Key-Volunteering-Statistics-2024-Update.pdf>), and *frequency of participation in local community events* (<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/cultural-and-creative-activities/latest-release>).

These four indicators (listed above) have been built into the Gather app for the benefit of local government, to gain insights into user population social connection over time, as well as how often users are accessing civic spaces, as well as what types of events are more popular allowing forward planning for event space booking. There is potential for collected data to be aggregated to state and federal level.

This entry uses datasets drawn from local government (Launceston City Council), state government (Australian Capital Territory), and federal government (Australian Bureau of Statistics) bodies, as well as global bodies (World Health Organisation).

# **Innovating Wellbeing Measurement – Uncovering New Connections**

The Gather App draws from the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Wellbeing Framework as a starting point and drills down to the specific domain of Social Connection, applying the Social Connection Domain indicators from the ACT Wellbeing Framework to gather data for both users, stakeholders and governments.

The app provides a user interface that creates a wellbeing dashboard tracking changes to connectedness over time as users engage with community events and social connectedness.

The Gather app has been developed as a response to the challenges of reduced wellbeing, which is influenced by social connection, and the eleven other domains as defined by the ACT Wellbeing Framework. Alongside this source of data, the same correlations between wellbeing and social connection can be found within the World Health Organisation’s “Social Determinants of Health” report, and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare’s “Australia’s Welfare 2023” report, which indicate that the experience of better wellbeing and social connection can be generalised across local, state, federal and global populations.

Four indicators of social connection, the measurement tools used by the Living Well survey which tracks the ACT population personal wellbeing index have been used within the Gather app, with an additional question added to capture the breadth of community events users participate in. Users will be prompted to enter their responses at regular intervals, allowing local governments to monitor how users are connected socially. There is potential for collected data to be aggregated to state and federal level.

The app prompts users to provide feedback on individual events, allowing hosts and local governments to see how events are promoting feelings of connectedness in the community in real time. Measuring responses to event involvement creates a useful novel data source providing insights into individual connectedness, measures group response so that they can build on positive events and learn from challenges to their events and showcases efforts to improve individual assessment of their experiences over time. Local governments can also use collected data to support host organisations to improve their events.