

MEDIA RELEASE

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Social cities

"Australians have put a lot of emphasis on trying to make cities more productive and sustainable, but devoted far less attention to what makes them friendly places to live," Grattan Cities Program Director Jane-Frances Kelly said today.

Launching Grattan's new report, [*Social cities*](#), Ms Kelly emphasised that relationships are critical to wellbeing. "A lack of face-to-face contact can put our health at risk," Ms Kelly said. "Unfortunately, there are worrying signs that isolation and loneliness are growing in Australia."

The report cites evidence that people have fewer friendships and neighbourhood connections than they did two decades ago. A quarter of Australian households now consist of people living by themselves and this is the fastest growing household type.

"By no means are we saying that everyone who lives alone is lonely," said Ms Kelly. "But if more Australians live by themselves this makes connecting with others outside the home all the more important."

Ms Kelly said that the way we build and organise our cities has a big part to play in helping to bring people together or in keeping them apart. "For example, we tend to hurry past a building that presents a blank wall to the street, whereas an open façade can create inviting spaces to stop and talk."

Grattan's report examines how improving the design of our cities and the way they function – from transport networks, to the availability of parks and sporting grounds, to the architecture of public spaces and buildings – makes it easier for people to connect with each other.

The report shows how even tiny changes, such as installing a few benches at the edge of a public area or converting an unused lot into a 'pocket park', can make urban spaces more welcoming.

"Improving social connection is not necessarily hard or costly. As the examples in our report show, in many cases, big returns can come from small outlays."

Australian cities are expected to keep growing for the foreseeable future said Ms Kelly. "If those cities are to improve quality of life for all then they will need to meet our social as well as our material needs."

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