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Attention:

The Hon. Dr Sarah KAINE, BEc, PhD MLC, Chair of Inquiry Committee
NSW Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Supplementary Information to the Submission made by LCSA to the Inquiry on the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in NSW

Dear Senator Kaine,

Thank you for inviting us to speak at the inquiry hearing at New South Wales Parliament house today. We appreciate the opportunity to submit this letter as supplementary documentation in relation to the submission made by LCSA in November 2024.

The depth and scope of submissions made by stakeholders covers many aspects of the prevalence of loneliness and its impact on vulnerable communities. The LCSA's submission and policy position has a specific and unique perspective on how a complex issue such as loneliness needs to be addressed. To that end, we would like to highlight the conceptual frameworks in which we promote the role of neighbourhood and community centres as well as their local, community development approach to engage with vulnerable communities.

Neighbourhood centres are place-based, locally-governed community organisations, and our 175 members constitute the largest community-led social infrastructure network in NSW. Among many things, neighbourhood centres facilitate community development projects, deliver social services and are an integral part of disaster management, responses and recovery.

In recognition of our and our members' submissions to the Inquiry, we highlight five key concepts:

1. Loneliness and social isolation are separate yet related concepts.
2. Social infrastructure to reach lonely people on the neighbourhood level is essential.
3. Loneliness is as much a social issue as it is a health one.
4. Addressing loneliness requires a community development approach rather than a service delivery response.
5. Measuring loneliness and the impact of strategies is complex and requires a whole-of-community and whole-of-government approach.

Social isolation is an objective measure, and initiatives can be drawn up around it to make contact with hard-to-reach socially excluded people. Loneliness, however, is subjective, and there's no way of knowing for sure if someone is lonely. While there is clearly an overlap between people experiencing loneliness while experiencing other societal disadvantage, there are plenty of people in communities who haven't engaged with local services and may not know that they can reach out to neighbourhood centres, or indeed anyone, for help with loneliness. So neighbourhood centres need the freedom and discretion to explore how loneliness is impacting their communities, and facilitate social connection in the way their communities want it and will use it.

We have drawn our position strongly on the experience of Loneliness, both as a health and as a social issue, in the UK. In 2013, Dr. Helen Kingston, a general practitioner in Frome, Somerset, recognised the detrimental effects of loneliness on her patients' health. To address this, she initiated the Compassionate Frome project, aiming to reconnect individuals with their community. The project involved creating a directory of over 400 local services and activities, ranging from exercise classes to support groups, facilitating social connections among residents.

The success of Compassionate Frome was evident: while emergency hospital admissions increased by 30% across Somerset, Frome experienced a 20% reduction in such admissions, alongside a 21% decrease in associated costs between 2013 and 2017.

On a national scale, the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness was established in 2016 to explore ways to mitigate loneliness in the UK. The commission's final report in December 2017 recommended appointing a lead minister to address the issue. In response, Prime Minister Theresa May appointed Tracey Crouch as the first Minister for Loneliness in January 2018, marking the UK's commitment to tackling loneliness as a public health concern.

While Compassionate Frome demonstrated the positive impact of community-based initiatives on health and well-being, the establishment of the Minister for Loneliness was primarily influenced by the Jo Cox Commission's findings. Both efforts underscore the importance of addressing loneliness through coordinated community and governmental actions.

The Commission identified community development as a key approach to addressing loneliness. In its final report, it highlighted the importance of building stronger communities where everyone has a sense of belonging. This focus on community development was central to the Commission's recommendations and has continued to influence initiatives aimed at combating loneliness in the UK.

In NSW, having a close relationship between the health and community services sector together with a commitment to a community-led approach to address Loneliness, would be a desirable and sustainable outcome for the future and we are here to support this.

If you or your colleagues on the inquiry committee have any questions in relation to our submission, or the supplementary information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Can Yaşmut
LCSA Executive Officer, 6 February 2025