LCSA responses to Questions on Notice

Inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales

6 March 2025

For any questions, please contact:

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1. Please detail the strengths and limitations of social prescribing in connecting health and community services to address loneliness.

The UK Government states that social prescribing enables organisations to refer people to a range of services that offer support for social, emotional or practical needs (UK Government 2018, p. 25). A more critical definition describes it as 'a mechanism for linking patients with non-medical sources of support within the community' (Lynne et. al. 2009, as cited by Russell p. 2).

Social prescribing can be a helpful paradigm to expand understanding of human health as having a core social and community component. It can take pressure off the health system and refer patients to social services that they may have missed out on otherwise.

However, practitioner Cormac Russell from the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute, DePaul University in the USA argues that social prescribing is limited in that it centres on individuals and individual outcomes, rather than health promotion or population health more broadly. It still operates primarily within a medical model, which isn't informed by the incredibly important social determinants of health.

While we can contribute to caring communities, ultimately caring communities cannot be prescribed or programmed. Russell asserts that we don't have a health problem, we have a village problem (p. 7):

> *Redirecting people into community activities without simultaneously doing much-needed community building and forming relationships with isolated citizens is doomed to fall short...*
>
> *'We must restore the social fabric of our communities and do so as collective citizens and not as isolated clients of healthcare systems and partner institutions.*

Ultimately, walls between institutional siloes need to come down to allow for more organic connections between health and community services to reduce loneliness and meet the needs of specific communities.

2. Noting LCSA's focus on social infrastructure in your evidence, please outline how and where this intersects with government policy in NSW and federally?

There is no social infrastructure policy at the Commonwealth level. Infrastructure Australia's 2021 Australian Infrastructure Plan, which does cover social infrastructure, does not include community building components, community spaces, and in fact recommends an almost entirely government-led process that makes little mention of the community sector. In any case, the 2021 Plan seems to have stalled after the 2022 federal election.

The NSW Government also has no social infrastructure policy. However, further down in this answer is reference to an upcoming agreement between a NSW state government department and LCSA on the role of neighbourhood centres as social infrastructure.

LCSA is supportive of social infrastructure definitions as outlined in the International Comparative Review on Social Infrastructure by the UK based Institute for Community Studies and the Bennett Institute for Public Policy Cambridge (2023), who note that specific definitions most commonly revolve around three key approaches:

1. Social infrastructure as the physical places that encourage social interaction.
2. Social infrastructure as created through public services, laws, and institutions.
3. Social infrastructure as voluntary and community sector infrastructure.

Social infrastructure includes childcare centres, schools, universities, hospitals, neighbourhood centres, libraries, parks, public pools, art galleries and so on. Different social infrastructure sectors are closely tied and many people need multiple and overlapping services and facilities.

Social infrastructure was audited for the first time by Infrastructure Australia in 2019, which is startlingly recent. In that Audit, Infrastructure Australia notes that, 'social infrastructure is essential to maintaining and improving the quality of life of all Australians. **It is critical for social inclusion and cohesion.** Social infrastructure provides not only the essential services required for communities to function, but also the services that make places liveable and help improve the quality of life for people living there' (p. 393).

The Audit goes on to say that, 'schools, sporting facilities, **community centres** and libraries often play central and multiple roles in these communities. This helps to build social cohesion and identity and can help foster community resilience in times of stress, such as natural disasters'.

The Audit notes that there is a challenge for governments in overcoming the interrelationships between social infrastructure sectors as we operate within siloes. 'A lack of integration across portfolios can create disjointed social policy and infrastructure investment, and poor outcomes for communities who may receive high-quality access to certain services but not others' (p. 393).'

Shared Commitment to Collaboration – NSW Government acknowledgement of neighbourhood and community centres as social infrastructure is a promising first step

LCSA and the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) are in the process of finalising a Shared Commitment to Collaboration between these two parties and neighbourhood and community centres to work together for strong, vibrant local communities in NSW. This commitment explicitly recognises neighbourhood and community centres (NCCs) as essential social infrastructure, and outlines ways that NCCs can assist the NSW Government to understand issues facing their communities to best drive policy investment. While there is no funding attached, LCSA views this commitment as a critical first step in recognising and resourcing the NCC social infrastructure network in NSW with core funding.

LCSA can send an update to the Committee once this work is finalised.

3. In your evidence you stated that social infrastructure was essential to reach lonely people on the neighbourhood level. Please expand on that statement.

Helping people to alleviate their loneliness requires an enormous degree of trust, both in relationships with centre staff, as well as trust in the organisation. Both things take time.

Becoming a trusted and visible organisation takes time and consistency. An organisation that has no local footprint, has a 'fly-in, fly-out' reputation, or doesn't respond flexibly to the community will not engender trust in the communities they purport to serve. The fact that Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre (NNIC) received one hundred responses in under a week to their local survey on loneliness is a testament to their 50-year presence, relevance and connection to their community (NNIC submission to this Inquiry).

On a basic level, the reason the sub-local neighbourhood level is relevant is because there must be people that know specific community members exist, and when they are missing. This is frighteningly relevant during natural disasters. As Wardell Core Neighbourhood Centre noted in their evidence, post-floods there were socially isolated people on rooves and in trees for up to 24 hours, and no one knew they were there. It could have ended in loss of life. (Wardell Core came into existence in 2022 in response to the Northern Rivers floods).

For a lonely or socially isolated individual, it may be months after their first presentation to a neighbourhood centre before they feel safe or comfortable to disclose to a trusted individual worker the depth of struggles, including loneliness, that they are experiencing. They generally do not open with 'I'm lonely', and in fact may never utter those words. This is particularly true in the context of 'learned loneliness', where people have learned to live without social connectedness post-pandemic (Chaudhuri 2023). Community development workers and social workers use their expertise to observe if a community member seems socially disconnected, and to understand the unspoken ways in which a person becomes more socially connected: having a brighter disposition, turning up to the centre and social activities regularly, letting centre staff know when not to expect

them (and to not be alarmed) if they will be away for a week, making friends that they inform you that they now see outside of the neighbourhood centre.

It is important to invest into community development activities from the ground up to address loneliness. This enables place-based organisations like neighbourhood centres to facilitate social connections between people, opportunities for individuals to find resources for their own hardship, to reconnect with their immediate community (neighbourhood or peers) or simply to 'find their tribe' and a sense of belonging.

One of the pitfalls in approaching complex issues such as loneliness with a 'service delivery' and programmatic model, hides in the administrative framework of public service commissioning or contracting activities in a community. The smallest possible government structure to be seen as local, is the local government. This can create the illusion of addressing issues locally, when in fact community happens and is felt on the neighbourhood level: in an apartment block, in a precinct or in one township within a Local Government Area.

LCSA sees its neighbourhood and community centre members as conduits between neighbourhood-level communities and local government-level initiatives and policies. Neighbourhood centres meet communities where they are, which may be the local school, train station, shopping centre, playground or library.

4. Please expand on the concepts of community building and community deterioration as they relate to loneliness.

> 'Until we address the root causes, social prescribing and similar ameliorative interventions run the risk of becoming the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff, driven by well-meaning but beleaguered volunteers while at the same time being advertised as a radical innovation: the fence at the cliff face' … 'We must come to the realisation that we do not have a safety problem, nor a social care problem, nor a youth problem, nor even a health problem; what we have is a village problem'.

(*Russell 2024*)

Academic research consistently supports the idea that community deterioration—through urbanisation, economic inequality, loss of social infrastructure, and digital alienation—contributes to increased loneliness. Addressing this issue requires policy interventions that invest in social infrastructure, strengthen neighbourhood cohesion, and create opportunities for inclusive social participation.

Community building and community deterioration are deeply intertwined with the experience of loneliness. The strength of social bonds, the availability of communal spaces, and the presence of inclusive, engaged networks all influence whether individuals feel connected or isolated.

Community building and the reduction of loneliness

Community building refers to the intentional process of strengthening relationships and creating a sense of belonging within a group or geographic area. Communities can create protective factors against loneliness by actively fostering social inclusion, recognising social isolation as a public health issue, and investing in communal resources. This occurs through:

- **Social networks and relationships**: Strong social networks, whether through friendships, families, or neighbourhood groups, provide emotional and practical support and counteract loneliness.
- **Inclusive public spaces**: Parks, libraries, and community centres create opportunities for spontaneous and structured social interactions, ensuring that individuals have accessible places to connect.
- **Shared activities and events**: Collective experiences, such as festivals, volunteer programs, and local initiatives, give people reasons to engage with one another, fostering a sense of belonging.
- **Technology and virtual communities**: Online groups and digital platforms can complement in-person relationships, offering people a way to connect despite physical distance or mobility challenges.

Community deterioration and the rise of loneliness

Community deterioration occurs when social ties weaken, institutions erode, or neighbourhoods become less hospitable to social interaction. This can happen due to various factors:

- **Urbanisation and transience**: Rapid urban development often leads to the displacement of long-standing communities, reducing the stability of social networks. Similarly, frequent moves for work or study can prevent individuals from forming deep and lasting connections.
- **Economic inequality and social exclusion**: Economic disparities can lead to the fragmentation of communities, as those with fewer resources may be unable to participate in social activities or may live in areas with weaker social infrastructure.
- **Loss of public and third spaces**: When communal places like libraries, parks, and local businesses close, opportunities for casual social interaction diminish, exacerbating social isolation.
- **Digital alienation**: While technology can facilitate connection, excessive reliance on digital interactions - especially when replacing in-person relationships—can lead to feelings of detachment and loneliness.
- **Cultural shifts and individualism**: Societal trends toward individualism and self-reliance may reduce the emphasis on collective wellbeing, making it harder for people to seek or offer social support.

When communities deteriorate, loneliness often follows, increasing the risks of mental and physical health problems. Addressing loneliness requires proactive efforts to rebuild social trust, invest in communal spaces, and prioritise inclusive policies that strengthen social bonds.

Russell notes that 'the Greater Rochester Health Foundation funds groups to recruit community builders to work in their neighbourhoods to reweave the social fabric of their communities and increase collective efficacy at the block level.'

5. Please explain how a government consultation process on loneliness would differ from a co-design or community development process.

More often than not in consultation processes, government is the starting point. It is LCSA's position that communities must be the starting point of any meaningful process to reduce loneliness, facilitated by trusted, place-based community organisations; and that co-design and community development processes are the right fit for this kind of work.

Consultation processes tend to involve consulting with relevant stakeholders on solutions that governments, bureaucrats or experts have designed to combat something they identified as a problem and decided needed action. How well or meaningfully that consultation impacts the end result ranges on a scale from not-at-all, to greatly impactful. There are often no benchmarks or scrutiny around the integration of consultation on decision-making processes. We are all familiar with the idea of 'box-ticking' processes that are more concerned with the appearance of consultation rather than the integration of it. As of March 2025, there is no NSW Government guide on what standard government consultation processes should involve.

Co-design and community development are closely linked, as both emphasise participatory approaches, local empowerment, and collaborative problem-solving. They share principles of participation, inclusion, empowerment and collaboration.

'Co-design' refers to a participatory approach to designing solutions, in which community members with lived experience are treated as equal collaborators with experts in the design process. However, the co-design process does not always invite participation from communities in the initial identification of issues, which may be decided by governments or experts. It is also known as generative design, co-creation and participatory design. It can be used to create, redevelop and evaluate a product, service or system. Co-design is a tool that is often used in community development.

Community development is a practice or framework based on human rights principles and social justice frameworks. Therefore, community development is broader than co-design and should underpin all aspects of an authentic co-design process

Within a community development framework, social issues are addressed on a grassroots level from the 'bottom up', usually guided or facilitated by community development practitioners. It aims to do things **with** people, rather than **for** people or **to** them. Neighbourhood centres support communities to flourish by fostering independence, focusing on capacity building and helping communities identify issues, aspirations and solutions, which may turn up entirely different

priorities to what governments or other top-down authorities might identify. Communities are at the centre at each stage of community development processes.

When co-design is underpinned by a community development framework, it results in:

- Stronger social connections by fostering relationships, trust and a shared sense of purpose
- More effective programs, as solutions co-created with communities are more likely to be adopted and sustained over time; and
- Greater social equity through amplifying the voices of marginalised groups, making development efforts more inclusive.

LCSA would be happy to work with the Committee or the Government to further explore how community development practices can be applied to addressing loneliness, with implementation occurring at the local level by trusted, locally-based organisations.

Reference list

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