

**Submission
No 12**

INQUIRY INTO PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF LONELINESS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Wardell CORE Inc

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Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation

Prepared by:

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On behalf of Wardell CORE Neighbourhood Centre

I am willing to attend a Committee Inquiry Hearing if invited



Introduction

Wardell CORE Neighbourhood Centre has been serving the Wardell district for just over two years, providing a vital hub for social connection, support, and recovery since the devastating 2022 floods. As a community-owned and operated centre, Wardell CORE has focused on locally-driven responses to the challenges of social isolation and loneliness, offering programs that address mental health, food security, social connection, and community resilience. Our centre provides a space for individuals to come together, fostering connections through social events, support groups, workshops, and volunteering opportunities, which are crucial in countering the effects of social isolation.

Our staffing model to date has included 2 part-time staff members who manage operations and coordination across our range of programs, and 2 part-time mental health service providers delivering our mental health and wellbeing program. We are supported by a team of over 30 dedicated volunteers who have been the backbone of our service delivery, ensuring we could provide a wide range of activities and support. However, with the recent conclusion of our funded programs, we are now at serious risk of losing all our paid positions. This will severely limit the scope and scale of the services we can offer, and without urgent investment, we may no longer be able to meet the needs of our community as effectively.

Evidence of Community Impact

Wardell CORE regularly evaluates the impact of its services through community surveys and feedback. Our most recent survey on community health and wellbeing was completed by 20% of our regular service users, providing valuable insights into the effectiveness of our programs:

- 76% of respondents are female, and over 50% of participants are over the age of 55.
- Approximately 90% of participants strongly agree that their community centre is useful and valuable, provides accessible information and resources, and offers them a place to seek help when needed. Many noted that our services provide information and resources they wouldn't have access to otherwise and help them stay informed about local events.
- Over 50% of participants visit the neighbourhood centre for mental health and wellbeing programs at least fortnightly.
- Approximately 80% of participants strongly agree that Wardell CORE has helped them manage their mental health and wellbeing and feel more connected to the community.

Further demonstrating community support, Wardell CORE recently raised over 600 signatories from our small regional community in just 48 hours, along with 100 letters in support of our centre receiving consent to remain as a permanent community facility.

Limitations and Constraints on Wardell CORE Neighbourhood Centre

Despite the success and value of our programs, Wardell CORE faces significant limitations due to funding constraints. Our ability to continue delivering critical services and expand to meet the growing demand is directly tied to available financial resources. The tangible limitations we face include:

1. **Loss of Paid Staff:** With the conclusion of our current funding, we are at immediate risk of losing all paid staff. This will severely impact our ability to coordinate services, manage volunteers, and deliver mental health and wellbeing programs. Our team has been instrumental in responding to the complex needs of the community, and without them, we will be forced to dramatically scale back essential services.
2. **Increased Demand for Services:** The demand for our services, particularly in the areas of food relief, mental health support, and social connection, has increased significantly post-flood. The compounding impacts of economic hardship and natural disasters mean that more residents are seeking support. However, without adequate resourcing, we will not be able to scale our programs to meet this rising need.
3. **Funding Uncertainty:** Wardell CORE currently relies on short-term, project-based funding, which is often restrictive and unpredictable. This patchwork funding model limits our ability to plan long-term, respond flexibly to emerging needs, and maintain core services consistently.
4. **Infrastructure and Operational Costs:** Maintaining our facility and ensuring the safety and comfort of our community members requires ongoing investment in infrastructure, utilities, and administrative costs. These fixed operational costs strain our limited budget, reducing the funds available for direct service delivery.

The Value of Additional Resourcing

Neighbourhood centres like Wardell CORE need stable, core funding to ensure we can continue to provide critical services and expand our reach to meet growing demand. Additional resourcing would allow us to maintain paid essential staff who are critical for managing and growing our programs. It would also enable us to expand our mental health, food relief, and social programs to meet increasing community needs. Furthermore, we could invest in infrastructure improvements, allowing us to offer more services and cater to a larger number of participants. Finally, additional funding would provide long-term stability and resilience for the community by ensuring we can maintain consistent support programs without the constant threat of funding cuts.

With adequate funding, centres like ours can make an even greater impact in addressing social isolation, loneliness, and community wellbeing.

The Role of Neighbourhood Centres in Addressing Social Isolation

Wardell CORE is at the heart of the Wardell community, offering a lifeline to residents who face the multifaceted challenges of social isolation. Our neighbourhood centre is a space where community members can access support, find companionship, and build relationships. We understand that 'loneliness'—a subjective feeling of being disconnected—and 'social isolation'—an objective lack of social contact—are related but distinct issues. Addressing both requires a nuanced approach that combines building social connections with providing safe spaces for community interaction.

The disruption caused by natural disasters, such as the 2022 floods, has further deepened social isolation in our region. Displacement, loss of homes, and the upheaval of daily routines have left many individuals feeling disconnected and without the usual social networks. This isolation has a compounding effect on mental health, making it harder for people to recover from trauma and exacerbating feelings of loneliness. Research shows that these feelings are particularly intense for those already vulnerable, such as the elderly, people with disabilities, those living in remote areas, and young people facing uncertain futures.

Loneliness and Social Isolation in the Wardell District

In our local Wardell district, social isolation is particularly pronounced among seniors, young people, and individuals experiencing financial or mental health hardships. The ongoing impacts of the floods, combined with economic pressures, have left many residents feeling isolated and disconnected. Our needs analysis and anecdotal feedback reveal that many individuals in the community had experienced a lack of regular social contact, contributing to feelings of loneliness, and that our programs have yielded significant improvements in community wellbeing, created a strong sense of place and have been successful in building social connection for residents throughout our district.

For example, one resident shared: *"After the floods, I felt like I lost everything—my home, my sense of belonging. Before the floods - I didn't really know my neighbours, but coming to Wardell CORE has helped me build new connections"* This quote is emblematic of the experiences of many in our district, highlighting the role that community connection plays in the healing process.

Wardell CORE has made significant efforts to identify and address the causes of loneliness. Our weekly programs, such as the Friday social eating nights, playgroups, and volunteer-led activities, offer residents a consistent opportunity to engage with others, build friendships, and strengthen community bonds. Through these programs, we have created a space where people feel seen, heard, and valued, reducing the isolation that many experience in their daily lives.

Successful Initiatives and Community Impact

One of our most successful initiatives is the **Friday Social Eating Program**, where community members gather to share a meal, build connections, and foster a sense of belonging. Funded in part through the NSW Government's 'Connected Community' grant, this program has served over 4,000 meals, offering a lifeline to those experiencing hardship, isolation, and food insecurity. The social aspect of sharing a meal has been a key factor in building trust and relationships, creating a space where people feel comfortable opening up and engaging with others.

Our community-centric approach—working with the community rather than for it—has been essential in creating programs that resonate with local needs. Feedback from participants, as well as external evaluations, have consistently highlighted the positive impact of these activities on reducing social isolation. One participant noted: *"I've met so many people through these dinners. It's made such a difference to my week."* Such testimonials illustrate the profound impact of our place-based initiatives.

The Value of Wardell CORE in Reducing Social Isolation

Wardell CORE plays an essential role in reducing loneliness and social isolation by providing a space for social connection, emotional support, and practical aid. Through partnerships with local organisations like the Ballina Rotary Club, Northern Rivers Womens and Childrens Service, and the Financial Counselling Service, we have expanded our capacity to address issues like food insecurity, mental health support, and crisis intervention. These partnerships enable us to provide a comprehensive range of services, ensuring that vulnerable residents can access the support they need without leaving their community.

The benefits of our programs extend beyond emotional and social wellbeing. By offering programs that reduce loneliness, we also alleviate the burden on the healthcare system, as research (Mihalopoulos C et al. (2020) and “A National Strategy to Address Loneliness and Social Isolation”) shows that increased community participation and social cohesion lead to better physical and mental health outcomes. Our services improve community resilience, helping individuals better cope with future challenges and reducing the demand on emergency and long-term support services.

Neighbourhood Centres: A Key Solution for NSW

The most important step the NSW Government can take to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in the communities is to provide a universal core funding model to neighbourhood centres in NSW. At present, neighbourhood centres receive no core funding from the NSW Government, which is out of step with other states on the Eastern Seaboard. We rely on a patchwork of program funding which is often inflexible and short-term.

Wardell CORE and other neighbourhood centres across NSW are the most effective and cost-efficient solution for addressing the challenges of social isolation and loneliness.

We provide cost-effective, high-impact services that foster social connection, reduce vulnerabilities, and build community resilience. Most importantly, we have the capability, capacity, and community trust to deliver immediate and lasting results. We are willing and ready to expand our impact with much-needed additional government investment.

Wardell CORE supports the core funding model policy proposed by our NSW peak body for neighbourhood centres, the Local Community Services Association (LCSA), and the policy recommendations in LCSA's submission to this Inquiry. Their core funding model, based on 2.5FTE minimum staff required for a safe working environment, is outlined here:

Core funding element	Cost per LCSA member organisation p.a.	Cost for 175 LCSA members p.a.
EO (SCHADS 8.1, 32h/wk)	\$120,901	\$21,157,719
Community Development Worker (SCHADS 5.1)	\$111,984	\$19,597,177
Admin worker (SCHADS 3.1, 15h/wk)	\$33,503	\$5,863,016
Operational contribution	\$50,000	\$8,750,000

Total	\$316,388	\$55,367,912
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The recent investment by the Queensland Government into core funding for neighbourhood centres in that state highlights the value of supporting these hubs, and we believe the NSW Government should follow suit. By investing in social infrastructure funding, NSW can ensure that neighbourhood centres are adequately resourced to tackle loneliness and social isolation, ultimately creating stronger, healthier, and more resilient communities.

Conclusion

Neighbourhood centres like Wardell CORE are not just service providers; they are lifelines for communities facing the compounded challenges of social isolation, mental health crises, and recovery from natural disasters. Without stable funding, centres like ours risk losing the very infrastructure that makes meaningful, community-driven support possible.

The NSW Government has a critical opportunity to invest in a proven solution—neighbourhood centres—that are already embedded in local communities, trusted by residents, and equipped to deliver immediate, high-impact results. Core funding will not only safeguard essential services but also empower centres to expand their reach, addressing the growing demand for support in times of crisis.

By investing in neighbourhood centres, the NSW Government can create a future where no one feels disconnected or left behind. This is not just about supporting centres; it is about building stronger, more resilient communities across NSW. We urge the Government to seize this moment and commit to long-term, sustainable funding for centres like Wardell CORE, ensuring that every resident has access to the support and connection they need to thrive.

Sincerely

Joel Orchard
President
Wardell CORE Inc Neighbourhood Centre

Mihalopoulos C et al. (2020). Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol 55:823-836.

A National Strategy to Address Loneliness and Social Isolation - Pre-Budget Submission 2021-2022
https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-05/171663_ending_loneliness_together.pdf