

Submission
No 31

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

Organisation: Tomaree Neighbourhood Centre

Date Received: 30 October 2024

Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation.

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Introduction:

In the heart of Salamander Bay, the Tomaree Neighbourhood Centre (TNC) has been a sanctuary for those in distress and financial hardship since its inception in 1989. Founded by welfare student Jenny Field, TNC has become a symbol of resilience, community spirit, and support. With a mission to empower the marginalised and vulnerable, TNC aims to build a thriving, connected community grounded in justice, equality, and social inclusion.

'Loneliness' and 'social isolation' are related but distinct concepts. It is possible to have social connections but still feel lonely. Conversely, it is possible to be socially isolated and not feel lonely.

Loneliness and social isolation were concerns before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic but have been exacerbated in the subsequent years. TNC has identified youth, carers, seniors, women (aged 50 years and over), and people living with a disability as cohorts who are vulnerable to loneliness in our area.

At TNC we are currently witnessing through our programs and clients who present to the Centre a troubling decline in mental health among individuals post-COVID, with many experiencing heightened anxiety, depression, and stress as a direct result of prolonged isolation. This situation has created a pervasive sense of disconnection, leading many to express a diminished sense of belonging and purpose. Such feelings have contributed to a sense of worthlessness and despair, particularly for those who were already vulnerable before the pandemic.

Additionally, we are observing an increase in substance use as a coping mechanism for loneliness. Many individuals are turning to alcohol or drugs to manage their feelings of

isolation. This trend highlights the urgent need for targeted support and intervention to address the mental health challenges and substance use that have emerged in the wake of the pandemic due to isolation and loneliness.

Social Isolation on the Tomaree Peninsula:

TNC hosts the Tomaree Interagency meetings which currently has approximately 100 stakeholders. The Interagency meeting are held bi-monthly to address key community issues, exchange information, and share valuable insights. Each meeting sees approximately 25-30 attendees, representing a diverse group that includes youth services, senior services, Indigenous services, domestic violence services, mental health services, addiction recovery programs, schools, and government agencies.

A recurring theme in these discussions is the pressing issue of loneliness and social isolation within our community. This concern has been amplified in the wake of COVID-19, affecting individuals across various demographics.

Collaboration with four local public schools in the Port Stephens LGA has highlighted significant impacts on students' resilience, confidence, engagement, and overall well-being. Teachers have reported noticeable declines in these areas, attributing them to the significant time students spent in isolation during the pandemic. Feedback from surveys and discussions with participants at our Early Intervention Well-being programs (Well-I-Am), alongside insights from educators, further underscores the need to address the effects of loneliness and social isolation on young people in our community.

These findings reinforce the importance of our collaborative efforts to develop targeted strategies and programs that foster connection and support mental well-being in our community.

One Example of TNC's Approach to Isolation and Loneliness:

In May 2020, TNC launched the Connecting Isolated Seniors Program in collaboration with Port Stephens Veterans and Citizens Aged Care Community Services (PSVCAC). The aim of the program was to assist seniors in utilising technology to maintain connections with their loved ones through the use of computer tablets, especially during a time when social interaction was limited.

The Australian Gas Light Company (AGL) generously provided funding for the tablets, while the Tomaree Neighbourhood Centre took care of sourcing and purchasing the necessary equipment. Both organisations worked together to create training materials that would help participants navigate their new devices. The distribution of tablets and the accompanying training sessions were conducted by the (PSVCAC) Community Services, ensuring that clients received ongoing support through home visits and phone assistance.

The program was highly successful, with each participant embarking on their own unique journey of acquiring new skills and exploring various online platforms. Many found joy in staying connected with family and friends through Facebook Messenger, enjoying the benefits of video calls. Others engaged their minds with a range of applications designed for

entertainment and mental stimulation, such as word search games, crosswords, and a specialised app for dementia care called “A Better Visit”.

Our Connecting Isolated Seniors Program is focused on alleviating the profound loneliness that many seniors face, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through surveys conducted before and after the program, we aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of our initiative in helping seniors combat feelings of isolation.

Before the program, we found that 100% of participants admitted to feeling lonely. This reality highlights the urgent need for programs that can foster connection and support to reduce social isolation. Every participant expressed their eagerness to join the Connecting Isolated Seniors Program, indicating a strong desire for social interaction and community engagement.

After completing the program, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. A significant 66% of participants reported feeling less lonely and socially isolated, with 34% strongly agreeing. This demonstrates the program's effectiveness in creating meaningful connections that help mitigate feelings of loneliness.

Client testimonials further illustrate the impact of the program. Before participating, many expressed a longing for deeper connections, eager to see family faces and have more contact with loved ones. Post-program, participants shared heartfelt reflections, such as: “I had to be pushed, but I enjoyed it so much! It’s great to be able to see my family’s faces,” and “I am so grateful to connect with my family.” One participant highlighted the emotional significance of the program by stating, “It was wonderful to see my husband’s face, especially since I couldn’t visit him in care due to COVID.” Furthermore, another participant commented that prior to the program she had not seen her sister’s face in years.” These insights underscore the critical role that our program played in addressing loneliness among seniors.

The Value of Tomaree Neighbourhood Centre in Reducing Loneliness and Social Isolation

Social isolation and loneliness are significant issues that TNC tackles head-on through various initiatives. Volunteer Information Sessions, held monthly, provide valuable insights into the rights and responsibilities of volunteering and a list of organisations looking for volunteers. The centre also conducts weekly SMART Recovery sessions, focusing on addiction recovery through self-management.

TNC's cultural programmes, wellbeing initiatives, parenting programmes, art therapy sessions, and community events like the Tomaree Community Connect Day are designed to bring people together, create connections and foster a sense of belonging. These efforts are further supported by financial counselling, English lessons, computer tutoring, and the distribution of a New Resident Book.

Volunteering also plays a major role in reducing social isolation, and we absolutely could not open our doors without our dedicated volunteers. With a small but mighty team of 14

volunteers who have collectively contributed approximately 100 years of service to TNC and the wider Port Stephens community.

At TNC, we currently operate with a small team consisting of two paid staff members: a Manager who is paid for 27.5 hours per week and a Bookkeeper who works 5.5 hours per week. While these staff members provide essential support, it is important to note that we rely heavily on our dedicated volunteers to fulfill our mission. The annual cost to replace our volunteers is a staggering \$150,270.12.

If the NSW Government invested further into NCCs, we would hire a Community Development Worker to connect with the community holistically. TNC could run regular programs that support a diverse range of cohorts outside of the current specific target groups that we are currently funded to deliver. Our Role as a social connector would only grow from this opportunity.

Neighbourhood Centres - Loneliness and Social Isolation:

The most important step the NSW Government can take to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in the community is to provide a universal core funding model to Neighbourhood Community Centre’s (NCCs) in NSW.

In the wake of the pandemic, society has witnessed a rise in loneliness and social isolation, exacerbated by the ongoing cost of living crisis, a severe housing shortage, and escalating mental health challenges. NCCs represent a vital social infrastructure that can be harnessed to combat these issues and foster connections within NSW communities. They are inclusive spaces that welcome individuals from all backgrounds—regardless of race, gender, sexuality, religion, age, or social status—promoting relationships among those who may feel isolated, vulnerable or marginalised.

Despite the significant role NCCs play in alleviating social isolation in NSW, they currently receive no core funding from the state government, making NSW one of the last regions in Australia to be in this situation. Instead, NCCs depend on program funding, which is often limited in duration and adaptability.

The Local Community Services Association (LCSA), the representative body for NCCs in NSW, has proposed a core funding model below that includes a minimum staffing requirement of 2.5 full-time equivalents to ensure safe and effective operations. Our centre, as a member of LCSA, fully supports this funding model.

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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Core funding will enable all Neighbourhood Community Centres (NCCs) to address social isolation and loneliness in ways that are tailored to the unique needs of their communities, recognising that these issues do not manifest uniformly. Implementing generic solutions, such as simply replicating social groups across the state, will not effectively combat this pressing epidemic. Instead, local communities should be empowered to come together and tackle social challenges collaboratively, with the support of their NCCs.

In 2022, the Queensland Government took a significant step by providing core funding to all NCCs in the state, amounting to \$230,000 per centre each year. This initiative partially stemmed from the findings of the 2021 Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness, which underscored the critical role NCCs play in mitigating these issues. This funding model grants NCCs the necessary flexibility and sustainability to remain operational while swiftly addressing the evolving needs of their communities.

Conclusion:

Tomaree Neighbourhood Centre's motto is "the Heart of the Community." NCCs serve as the vital heartbeat of local communities, and any future strategy aimed at combating loneliness and social isolation must place these welcoming, community-focused organisations at the forefront. They are essential for fostering meaningful connections, nurturing healthy relationships, and promoting a sense of belonging for everyone in NSW. Our centre fully endorses the LCSA's recommendations to this Inquiry, which recognise NCCs as critical social infrastructure in the fight against social isolation and loneliness.