

Submission
No 34

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

Organisation: Coffs Harbour Neighbourhood Centre

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Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation.

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Introduction

The Coffs Harbour Neighbourhood Centre has been operating in Coffs Harbour for over 30 years, and is a central hub offering community support, fostering community connection and building the capability of people in Coffs Harbour to live a life they value. Coffs Harbour Neighbourhood Centre is located within the Coffs Harbour Community Village and interacts with a variety of people and services in that setting on a day-to-day basis. We are acutely aware of the challenges for community members in relation to loneliness and social isolation and its subsequent impact on wellbeing. We support positive outcomes for people by offering a safe and welcoming place with opportunities to participate in a broad range of activities, supports and services, as well as playing a pivotal role in collaborating with the community services sector in Coffs Harbour, more generally. These activities include the provision of information, referral and advocacy, the coordinated provision of essential support, education and skills training, access to volunteering opportunities, digital skills and community computer and facilities access. These supports are critical for reducing social isolation and loneliness both on a day-to-day basis and in times of natural disasters and pandemics.

Social Isolation in Coffs Harbour and surrounds

We are hearing from an increasing number of community members who identify that due to a range of factors, they are experiencing both loneliness, described as a feeling that arises when the connections they aspire to are not meeting their wishes, and social isolation, an objective measure of the contacts the individual has and frequency of these connections. These experiences are affecting different age groups, although they are most prevalent in older people and people who have relocated to the area to try and make positive changes. However, these individuals are often moving away from established family and friendship networks. Older people regularly communicate that they are experiencing loneliness due to the aging of their life-partner, loss of friends, reduced mobility, loss of independence due to cessation of driving. Retiring from the workforce, limited transport options and digital exclusion negatively impacting on their independence.

The impact of Covid has exacerbated these feelings and experiences as many activities that were occurring pre-Covid have not been able to re-energise the Coffs community. This includes the Coffs Harbour Educational and Recreation Program (CHERP), that had to fold recently as their membership base and the number of activities they were able to operate was reduced significantly as a result of the pandemic.

The Centre has tried to continue some of the activities that were offered pre-Covid but do not have a strong enough resource base to be able to support the people that need this level of connection. Since Covid our costs have increased more rapidly and there is a noticeable increase in the general anxiety of people that we interact with.

“The Monday craft group has given me the opportunity to meet people; it is the only day I look forward to and is the joy of my life. The ladies have become my friends, and we sit around, have a laugh, let off steam and support each other” (Craft Group member).

Our approach to Loneliness and Isolation

At the Neighbourhood Centre in Coffs Harbour, we focus on delivering a volunteer program and have over 70 volunteers. Many volunteers initially communicated that they wanted to engage with volunteering to meet new people as well as giving something back to the community and using their skills. The volunteer program has been especially effective for people who have moved to Coffs Harbour or who may have finished paid work and be missing the connections with family and other people. Through the volunteering program, many people have made life-long friendships with other volunteers and these relationships transcend the relationships within the organisation.

“Volunteering at the CHNC has increased my awareness that all humans require help at certain times in their life. Even myself personally it has increased my social connections and values, improved my connection to the community and definitely reduced that feeling of loneliness” (Regular volunteer).

In addition to the volunteering program, people accessing food support at CHNC have also advised that long-lasting friendships have been formed. We work in partnership with Oz Harvest who deliver food to the centre 3 days a week and approximately 60 people each week come to the centre to access this service. It is never known when the yellow van will arrive as it depends on how long it takes to collect the food from supermarkets. This time, when many people are waiting at the Centre, creates an opportunity for connection. People from all different backgrounds, and cultures have formed lovely connections, once again showing the value of the Centre in facilitating this.

We are also active in the community events space and regularly collaborate with other local service providers to create and participate in community events, which improves loneliness at the community level. Our annual Open Day is one such example of this where over 100 people attend to connect with our programs and services and participate in hands-on activities.

The value of CHNC in in reducing loneliness and social isolation

The Neighbourhood Centre at Coffs Harbour runs many social activities that reduce loneliness and social isolation in our community, including craft groups, mentoring groups, support and recovery groups and recreation and leisure groups. We offer low-cost room hire to other community groups who offer additional activities at the centre which encourage participation from community members in Coffs Harbour and last year saw 33 different groups use our rooms. We regularly engage with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse community members as Coffs harbour has a high Yazidi cohort from Iraq and Syria and the Rohingya people from Myanmar. We have established a Ladies conversational English group, homework learning clubs for students from these groups and deliver a Digital skills program for 50 women from the Yazidi community.

Volunteering also plays a major role in reducing social isolation. The Neighbourhood Centre has approximately 70 volunteers who regularly give their time and bring extensive knowledge and life experience. Last year the Neighbourhood Centre volunteers gave per week giving a total of 5,621 hours. Based on NSW peak volunteering body, The Centre for Volunteering's Cost of Volunteering Calculator, volunteers are now worth \$43.27 per hour so in addition to the value of social connections our volunteers gave a total value of \$243,220 (2023 – 2024).

In 2023 – 2024, our centre identified it connected with approximately 910 individual community members per week from visiting the Centre. We provided 9,482 occasions of service, so approximately 194 per week. With most people, when asked, identifying that their experience of social connection was improved because of visiting the Centre. Further secure and recurrent funding can only increase our impact on social isolation in our local community.

Important initiatives that Coffs Harbour Neighbourhood facilitates include our local Community Drug Action Team (CDAT) a project raising awareness regarding gambling via Gambling Aware and a new partnership with Open Minds that has seen the establishment of a Medicare Local Mental Health service at the Community Village. These areas of work are related to the broader incidence of loneliness and its impacts.

With further investment from the NSW Government, we would increase our capacity to coordinate additional groups and programs including expanding the volunteering service to connect people to recreational and leisure opportunities as well as volunteering opportunities. These opportunities would enhance social connectedness and provide additional wellbeing benefits for the community.

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 NCCs in NSW. We know from the people who come into the Centre, that loneliness and social isolation is impacting on many different members of the community and is increasing due to factors including the effects of COVID19, family and relationship breakdown, increasing prevalence of mental health, especially in young people, increased challenges face by aging and the increase in cost-of-living pressures.

Neighbourhood Centres and their associated facilities are essential social infrastructure and play an important role not just in reducing social isolation and loneliness generally but also in leveraging community partnerships to establish groups, activities and additional opportunities for participation and connection in Coffs Harbour. Our Neighbourhood Centre is known as ‘the place to go when you don’t know where to go’ and welcomes everyone, regardless of race, gender, sexuality, religion, age or social status and by their very nature build connections between individuals and organisations, particularly those who are isolated, vulnerable and disenfranchised.

In considering strategies for reducing loneliness and social isolation in New South Wales, the NSW Government needs to adequately resource centres as the key pieces of social infrastructure they are and can be to reduce loneliness and social isolation. By doing so, the NSW Government could invest in citizen-led, place-based solutions.

Despite the enormous impact Neighbourhood Centres have in reducing social isolation, they receive no core funding from the NSW Government – one of the last states in Australia where this is the case. They are reliant on program funding, which is often short-term, inflexible and is linked to specific outcomes for specific cohorts, for example, children and families.

The peak body for NSW Neighbourhood Centres, the Local Community Services Association (LCSA), outlines its core funding model below, based on 2.5FTE minimum staff required for a safe working model. Our centre, as a LCSA member, endorses this 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

Core funding means that all Neighbourhood Centres can respond to social isolation and loneliness however it manifests in their communities, which we know is not uniform and can be exacerbated by limited access to services for example in regional and rural areas. Token solutions to loneliness and social isolation by “cookie cutting” more social groups across the state will not address this epidemic. Local communities need to be empowered, through local Neighbourhood Centres, to unite and solve social issues together from the ground up. Each community has its own nuances and issues as evidenced through Coffs Harbour Neighbourhood Centre’s projects, and each community can use their resources with the right guidance and investment through NSW Neighbourhood Centres.

Conclusion

With social isolation and loneliness directly linked to depression, anxiety and other mental health and wellbeing outcomes, it is critical to acknowledge the essential work Neighbourhood Centres undertake to facilitate positive community connections and forge community partnerships. The work of Coffs Harbour Neighbourhood Centre has demonstrated that creating opportunities and facilitating community engagement can reduce loneliness and social isolation. We trust that the Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation will consider our insights and recommendations as they develop strategies to address these critical issues.

National Neighbourhood Centre Week’s motto in 2024 was “Stronger Together” and any strategy to address loneliness and social isolation in the future should ensure that these local, welcoming, place-based organisations are at front and centre, creating vital connection, healthy relationships and belonging for all in NSW. Our Centre supports LCSA’s recommendations to this inquiry that position Neighbourhood Centres as essential social infrastructure to address social isolation and loneliness.

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