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

Organisation: SSI

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Inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in NSW

New South Wales Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues

Submission – November 2024

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Acknowledgement of Country

SSI acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work. We pay respect to Elders past and present and recognise their continuous connection to Country.

Background

SSI welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the New South Wales Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues Inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in NSW.

SSI is a national non-for-profit organisation that delivers a range of human services that connect individuals, families, and children from diverse backgrounds with opportunities – including settlement support, disability programs, community engagement initiatives and training and employment pathways. At the heart of everything we do is a drive for equality, empathy, and celebration of every individual.

SSI was founded in Sydney in 2000 with the aim of helping newly arrived refugees settle in Australia. Over time, our expertise in working with people from diverse cultural and linguistic (CALD) backgrounds served as the foundation for a gradual expansion into other social services and geographical areas.

In 2018, SSI merged with Queensland-based Access Community Services, and in 2019 opened in Victoria, providing an extensive footprint across the eastern coast of Australia. In FY2023, SSI supported over 56,000 clients across more than 59 programs and community-based services. We are also a leading provider of evidence-based insights into the social sector and are known as an organisation that can reach communities, including newcomers, considered by many to be 'hard to reach'.

With respect to newcomers, successful settlement and integration are protective factors that buffer against the risk and impacts of loneliness and social isolation. However, government policy and public discourse on integration tends to focus on a narrow band of markers — employment, education, English proficiency and health — and often ignores the important and interrelated dimensions of newcomers' social connections, and cultural and civic participation. Similarly, service delivery needs to support inclusion. This means being responsive to individual people's contexts, where their particular intersecting identities can give rise to the risk of loneliness and social isolation. SSI is well placed to provide input to this Inquiry through our experience of working with migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum, people with disability, young people and families to support their health and wellbeing, economic participation and social inclusion so that they can reach their full potential. Our submission addresses specific Terms of Reference of this Inquiry.

Summary of Recommendations

From SSI's perspective, New South Wales can address the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness and isolation by responding to two key challenges:

1. Ensuring the successful settlement and integration of migrants and refugees;

2. Ensuring accessibility and inclusion of people who are at risk of loneliness and social situation due to intersectionality, that is barriers and inequity that arise from the interaction of certain identities with societal systems.

General Recommendation:

Build consensus around a consistent measure of loneliness and conduct research to build greater understanding of the extent and impacts of loneliness for different cohorts of the NSW population so that efforts to address loneliness can be more targeted and effective.

SSI asks the Inquiry to recommend that the NSW Government:

Recommendation 1:

Value and resource community engagement initiatives, such as SSI's Welcome Project and other initiatives that are tailored to different cohorts of newcomers to strengthen social, cultural and civic participation as a critical part of integration in NSW and thereby address loneliness and social isolation among those cohorts.

Recommendation 2:

Strengthen access to NSW universal services by collaborating with multicultural organisations and community leaders and building government agencies' and service providers' culturally responsive capability.

Recommendation 3:

Ensure that the digital transformation of government services is anchored in policy that promotes equitable access by newcomers. This should include building digital gateways (i.e., websites, apps) that are more intuitive — with less need for digital skills — and that minimise language barriers (i.e., in-language, plain English).

Response to specific Terms of Reference :

(a) the extent of loneliness and social isolation in NSW and how this is measured and recorded, including opportunities for additional and/or improved data capture

Ending Loneliness Together, a national organisation underpinned by lived experience, research, community, government and health expertise, defines loneliness as a subjective unpleasant or distressing feeling of a lack of connection to other people, along with a desire for more, or more satisfying, meaningful social relationships.[1] Loneliness and social isolation are related concepts. Ending Loneliness Together defines persistent loneliness as feeling lonely for at least 8 weeks; and social isolation as having objectively few social relationships, social roles, group memberships, and infrequent social interaction. Persistent social isolation is defined as having infrequent social contact for at least 8 weeks. Based on a longitudinal study using data from its State of the Nation Report 2023, Ending Loneliness Together found that 1 in 3 Australians feel lonely at any given time, and 1 in 4 experience persistent loneliness.[2] At the New South Wales level, the study found that almost a quarter of people (24.5%) reported being persistently lonely; and one in seven (14%) reported having persistent social isolation.

Life changes and circumstances such as financial hardship, relationship breakdown, grief and loss and health conditions can contribute to loneliness and social isolation.[3]

While there is some research on the extent of loneliness and social isolation at a population level (with data on age, gender, work and relationship status and household composition), additional disaggregation of data (e.g. by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, country of birth) could provide a more solid evidence base to inform policy and underpin targeting specific at-risk cohorts to address loneliness and social isolation in NSW. SSI supports the adoption of a consistent measure of loneliness in all research on loneliness in NSW.[4]

- General Recommendation: Build consensus around a consistent measure of loneliness and conduct research to build greater understanding of the extent and impacts of loneliness for different cohorts of the NSW population so that efforts to address loneliness can be more targeted and effective.

(b) the identification of populations most at risk of loneliness and social isolation

People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

While there are significant gaps in terms of identifying populations most at risk of loneliness and social isolation there are indications that people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD)

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[1] Ending Loneliness Together. (2024). *Why we feel lonely: A deep dive into how different life circumstances contribute to persistent loneliness and social isolation.* Retrieved from https://lonelinessawarenessweek.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/why-we-feel-lonely.pdf
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Badcock J., & Lim, M. (2021). *A Guide to Measuring Loneliness for Community Organizations*.

backgrounds are one of the cohorts at higher risk of loneliness and social isolation at the national and state level. This is significant for New South Wales considering that in the 2021 Census almost a third of the population spoke a language other than English in the home (29.5%).[5]

At the national level, Ending Loneliness Together recently completed a study in 2023 of a nationally representative sample of over 4,000 Australians aged 18-92 years.[6] The study found that people from CALD backgrounds are 1.5 times more likely to experience loneliness compared to people who are not from CALD backgrounds. Similarly, people from CALD backgrounds were 1.2 times more likely compared to people who are not from CALD backgrounds to experience social isolation. Studies in other countries have shown that loneliness varies by ethnic and migrant statuses in countries in Europe and North America. A recent Australian study drawing on data from the Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia Surveys shows that migrants from non-English-speaking countries report higher levels of loneliness, as compared with native-born, non-Indigenous Australians.

While this research is welcome, more needs to be done to understand the population cohorts most at-risk of loneliness and isolation within CALD communities. For example, there is evidence of high levels of loneliness reported among newly arrived refugees associated with poor general health and mental illness.[7]

Young people have the greatest risk

At a population level, Ending Loneliness Together found that young people have the greatest prevalence of loneliness out of all age cohorts.[8] Over two in five (41.4%) of people aged 18-24 years report persistent loneliness. That said, SSI contends that this is too broad a category to identify meaningful policy or practice responses to address loneliness and social isolation and that a more granular understanding of the risk factors for loneliness and social isolation would highlight young people most-at-risk of loneliness. For example, in SSI's experience, young people who are transitioning from Out-of-Home care are at particular risk of social isolation and loneliness. The background of trauma and disruption for these young people warrants extending support beyond the age of 18. This aligns with the Home Stretch campaign,[9] a coalition of more than 200 organisations nationally (including SSI) that is advocating for state and territory governments to extend care to any young person needing or seeking foster care, until 21 years, aligning with what occurs in other family settings in Australia.

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[5] Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2021a). *Permanent migrants in Australia*. Retrieved from https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/permanent-migrants-australia/latest-release; ABS (2021b). *2021 New South Wales, Census All persons QuickStats.* Retrieved from https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/1. NSW Government Multicultural Health Communication Service. (n.d). *About CALD Communities.* Retrieved from https://www.mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au/about-us/cald-community#:~:text=The%20percentage%20of%20people%20born,population%20(ABS%20Census%202020 16).

[6] Ending Loneliness Together. (2024). Op. cit.

[7] Chen, W., Wu, S., Ling, L., & Renzaho, A. M. N. (2019). Impacts of social integration and loneliness on mental health of humanitarian migrants in Australia: evidence from a longitudinal study. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health.* 43(1). Retrieved from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1753-6405.12856

[8] Ending Loneliness Together. (2024). Op. cit.

[9] Home Stretch. (2024). *Young people in state care should have a place they call home and support until the age of 21.* Retrieved from https://thehomestretch.org.au/

(c) evidence of the psychological and physiological impacts of loneliness on people, including young people, the elderly, those living with a disability, those living in regional areas and the bereaved

The impacts of loneliness on newcomers

While there is evidence that migrants from non-English speaking countries are more likely to experience loneliness, there is little evidence of the impacts of loneliness apart from studies conducted with refugees.

An analysis of a longitudinal study of over 1,700 refugees and humanitarian entrants who had recently settled in Australia found that increased loneliness during resettlement was associated with poor general health and mental illness.[10] Concerningly, refugees who reported overcoming loneliness and persistent loneliness nonetheless reported poorer ongoing mental health over time than those who did not report loneliness.

Another study that analysed four waves of data from the same national longitudinal study of refugees, Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA), found that a consistently prominent association between mental health, loneliness and adjustment to life in Australia.[11]

These studies provide evidence of the impacts of loneliness and social isolation on newly arrived refugees and highlight the importance of settlement services to address post-migration stressors and loneliness. This research aligns with SSI's experience on the importance of supporting refugees' integration and settlement to address the risks of mental ill health associated with loneliness, so that they can thrive and fully participate and contribute to society.

(d) evidence linking social connection to physical health

A holistic approach to settlement and integration bolsters social connection and physical health

To ensure successful settlement and integration in NSW, it is essential to address newcomers' social connection. Social networks are vital as they enhance opportunities in employment, education, language learning, and overall wellbeing.[12] Civic participation, such as volunteering, fosters community ties and helps newcomers build relationships with the local population.[13]

SSI, in partnership with Western Sydney University, has conducted three phases of empirical research on social connections among newly arrived refugees in NSW. Findings indicate that newly arrived refugees, even with language barriers, develop mixed friendship networks and a positive sense of belonging and trust in their community within four years of residency. However,

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[10] Chen, W., Wu, S., Ling, L., & Renzaho, A. M. N. (2019). Op. cit.

[11] Wu S, Renzaho AMN, Hall BJ, Shi L, Ling L, Chen W. Time-varying associations of pre-migration and post-migration stressors in refugees' mental health during resettlement: a longitudinal study in Australia. *Lancet Psychiatry* 2021, 8, 36–47. Retrieved from https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33156999/

[12] Brell, C., Dustmann, C., & Preston, I. (2020). The labor market integration of refugee migrants in high-income countries. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 34(1), 94-121.

[13] Antonsich, M. (2010). 'Searching for Belonging – An analytical framework'. *Geography Compass*, 4(6), 644-659.

the research also highlights disparities in women reporting more challenges in forming mixed friendship networks and engaging with Australian neighbours compared to men,[14] highlighting the need for gender-responsive settlement support.[15] Moreover, this phase of the research, conducted during the pandemic, underscores refugees' commitment to civic responsibilities and contributing to the wider community, with nearly two-thirds volunteering the month prior to being surveyed.[16]

The research found a strong positive correlation between social connection linked to support from other community groups, making friends and feeling part of the Australian community - all contributed to a positive overall experience of settling in Australia.

The research supports the investment that SSI makes in community engagement initiatives to foster informal interactions between newcomers and the host community.[17] One such initiative is the Welcome Project, which connects new arrivals from refugee backgrounds with volunteer Welcome Ambassadors who share common interests. This program operates in Sydney and regional areas like Coffs Harbour, aiming to create a welcoming environment for refugees and help them establish a sense of belonging and connection to a hitherto new, unfamiliar place.

At the local level, Foundations for Belonging research found that refugees overwhelmingly viewed their neighbourhoods as places where people from different backgrounds get along – higher than responses to the same measure from the general Australian population.[18] While the research did not specifically examine loneliness, characteristics of, or satisfaction with, their neighbourhoods, may shape social connection. In a recent study of older migrants in Australia, more favourable neighbourhood characteristics and higher levels of satisfaction with different aspects of the neighbourhood were shown to be associated with lower levels of loneliness.[19] This positive association highlights the role of stronger social connection in reducing the risk of loneliness among newcomers.

(g) the identification of existing initiatives by government and non-government organisations to mitigate and reduce loneliness and social isolation

Non government organisations' initiatives

At the community level, SSI delivers targeted initiatives that foster social connections between newcomers and the broader host community that can reduce loneliness and social isolation.

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[14] Culos, I., McMahon, T., Khorana, S., Robertson, S., Baganz, E., Magee, L., Agha, Y. (2022). *Foundations for Belonging 2022 Insights on Newly Arrived Refugees: Family separation and reunion during the pandemic*. Settlement Services International/Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] SSI. (2019). *All in for Armidale: A whole-of-community approach to Ezidi* settlement; Watt, S., McMahon, T., & Paolini, S., (2023). *From the 'resistant' to the 'champions': Community attitudes during the first four years of refugee settlement in Armidale, NSW*. University of New England/SSI.

[18] Culos, et al. (2022). Op. cit.

[19] Lam, J. (2022). Neighborhood Characteristics, Neighborhood Satisfaction, and Loneliness Differences Across Ethnic–Migrant Groups in Australia, *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, 77(11), 2113–2125. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbab219

These connections facilitate two-way intercultural dialogue that address community concerns, reduces prejudice, and builds mutual understanding.[20]

For example, SSI organises cultural activities that allow newcomers to contribute to the local community's cultural fabric through artistic and cultural expression through our Arts and Culture program.[21] NSW Government investment in this area would also advance the Commonwealth Multicultural Framework Review's high priority recommendation (Recommendation 4) to have a national plan to celebrate and acknowledge Australia's cultural diversity.[22]

Similarly, in SSI's experience, peer support programs can also play a significant role in addressing loneliness and social isolation for people with disability – another cohort identified as being at greater risk of loneliness and social isolation. In 2020, SSI implemented a successful model for disability support groups in multicultural communities across NSW called the Multicultural Peer Network (MPN). The MPN was a collection of impactful, peer-led support groups which promoted independence among people with lived experience of disability from multicultural communities, as well their carers and families. The program was funded through the Australian Government Department of Social Services. The MPN program, tailored disability support groups to different cultures, languages and interests which had a positive impact on people with disability. Over 70 community leaders were recruited and trained as peer group facilitators, and over 1000 participants were supported across over 97 networks in 15 languages. The evaluation of the MPN found that over 90% of program participants (92%) and almost 90% of family members and carers (87%) reported an increase in confidence and motivation in accessing NDIS and mainstream services, and increased confidence, motivation and connections in communities.[23]

Families at all stages, particularly in the early years, require support and connection to thrive and this is particularly important in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. SSI has experience in delivering place-based initiatives through Community Hubs which bring local education, health, community, and settlement services together in a familiar and welcoming environment to make it easier for newcomer families with young children to access the services and assistance they need. These Hubs provide families with a sense of belonging and facilitates the development of friendships and support networks. These Hubs are located in-community, for example, near local schools, removing major transport barriers to access support and services. SSI runs eight Hubs in NSW (Blacktown, Parramatta, Cumberland and Coffs Harbour).

In SSI's view, the examples presented above share two intersecting threads to bolster protective factors against the risk of loneliness and social isolation by:

- investing in building social connection among newcomers through a variety of approaches;

- tailoring these initiatives to the community whether this be people with disability or families.

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[20] International Organisation for Migration (IOM). (2021). *The Power of "Contact". Designing, Facilitating and Evaluating Social Mixing Activities to Strengthen Migrant Integration and Social Cohesion between Migrants and Local Communities. A review of lessons learned.* Geneva

[21] Beauchamp, T., & McMahon, T. (2023). *Policy Brief: Building pathways to belonging: Advancing integration for newcomers in Australia.*

[22] Australian Government. (2024). *Towards fairness: A multicultural Australia for all.* Retrieved from https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/multicultural-framework-review/Documents/report-summary/multicultural-framework-review-report-english.pdf

[23] Insight Consulting Australia. (2023). *Evaluation of the Multicultural Peer Networks.* Unpublished.

Government initiatives to mitigate and reduce loneliness and social isolation among newcomers

Newcomers to Australia continue to face a range of barriers in accessing universal services such as health, education, employment, housing and justice services. Improving access for diverse communities requires change at multiple levels alongside staff training and development, such as government policy; professional standards; and organisational policies and practice.[24]

The challenge of ensuring newcomers' access to universal services was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic which saw an accelerated digital transformation and increasing reliance on digital access and literacy in everyday life.[25]

SSI's Foundations for Belonging research has identified digital skills as a major challenge for newly arrived refugees, alongside language barriers, in access to government services.[26] The research highlighted a notable gap in digital skills and confidence, especially among refugee women and older people. In response to this challenge, SSI initiated programs such as a 10-week digital literacy course for mature-aged refugees, improving their skills and enabling them to assist others in their communities.

While these kinds of frontline initiatives have merit, the NSW Government has an obligation to ensure that the digital transformation of government services is progressed in ways that promote equitable access for newcomers through developing culturally responsive digital platforms that are more intuitive, minimise language barriers (e.g. be in-language, plain-English) and require less technical skill from users to navigate.[27] The NSW Government's role is to socialise effective innovations developed by non-government organisations in the community sector, to ensure all communities across the state share its benefits.

(i) steps the State Government can take to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in the community

NSW can tackle loneliness by strengthening integration and inclusion

Successful integration is essential to enable newcomers to access services and reduce inequalities in education, economy, and health. It serves dual functions: as a protective factor against the impacts of loneliness and helps newcomers realise their full potential. This Inquiry presents an opportunity for a stronger focus by the NSW Government to strengthen its response to settlement and integration and address the higher risk of loneliness among newcomers. To

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[24] National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC). (2006). *Cultural competency in health: A guide for policy, partnerships and participation.* Retrieved from https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/cultural-competency-health; Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. (2023). *Final Report – Executive Summary, Our vision for an Inclusive Australia and Recommendations.* Retrieved from https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2023-11/Final%20report%20-%20Executive%20Summary%2C%20Our%20vision%20for%20an%20inclusive%20Australia%20and%20Recommendations.docx

[25] Beauchamp, T., & McMahon, T. (2023). Op. cit.

[26] Culos, et al. (2022). Op. cit.

[27] Ibid.

effectively support newcomers, NSW Government policies should be tailored to newcomers' diverse needs, considering intersectional factors such as gender, age and disability status.[28]

This opportunity is presented against a trend where Australia's integration policies, compared with similar migrant-receiving countries, is going backwards in the extent that they help integrate migrants and refugees. Under an international benchmark, in 2019, Australia's integration policies ranked relatively high — six out of 56 participating countries.[29] However, compared to 2014, migrants in Australia faced greater insecurity and more barriers to basic rights and opportunities.[30] Effective integration policies are one of the strongest factors that foster a sense of belonging and civic participation; set the tone for positive attitudes and interactions between newcomers and the broader community; and nurture an overall sense of belonging, wellbeing and trust, while restrictive policies create exclusion and division.[31]

Through considering this submission's recommendations, the NSW Government has the opportunity to be the lead example of best practice to not only combat loneliness and social isolation but also enhance social capital and participation across all communities. While there is increasing awareness of the prevalence and impact of loneliness and social isolation at the wider population level, in SSI's view responses need to be appropriately targeted to specific cohorts, to ensure greater equity in addressing loneliness and social isolation. To that end, SSI proposes that the Inquiry recommend the following:

- Recommendation 1: The NSW Government should value and resource community engagement initiatives, such as SSI's Welcome Project and other initiatives that are tailored to different cohorts of newcomers to strengthen social, cultural and civic participation as a critical part of integration in NSW and thereby address loneliness and social isolation among those cohorts.

- Recommendation 2: The NSW Government strengthen access to NSW universal services by collaborating with multicultural organisations and community leaders and building government agencies' and service providers' culturally responsive capability.

  Recommendation 3: The NSW Government ensure that the digital transformation of government services is anchored in policy that promotes equitable access by newcomers. This should include building digital gateways (i.e., websites, apps) that are more intuitive — with less need for digital skills — and that minimise language barriers (i.e., in-language, plain English).

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[28] Beauchamp, T., & McMahon, T. (2023). Op. cit.
[29] Migrant Integration Policy Index. (2020a). Retrieved from Migrant integration policy index 2020: Australia.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Beauchamp, T., & McMahon, T. (2023). Op. cit.