

**Submission
No 41**

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

Organisation: RSL NSW
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Standing Committee into the
Prevalence, Causes and Impacts of Loneliness in New South Wales

Contact Details

The contact details for the relevant team at RSL NSW are –

Introduction

RSL NSW is a leading voice Ex-Service Organisation (ESO), with 300 sub-Branches and more than 27,000 members across the State. RSL NSW works with community groups, other ESOs, State and Federal governments to represent veterans and their families.

As part of its Charitable Purpose, RSL NSW aims to improve social connection between current- and former-serving ADF personnel and their families, whilst advocating for improved public policy outcomes.

This submission has been guided by the Terms of Reference directing the Standing Committee into the Prevalence, Causes and Impacts of Loneliness in New South Wales. Through a veteran-specific lens, it will address the extent of loneliness and isolation and methods of recording and data capture; identification of at-risk populations; identifying existing initiatives undertaken by RSL NSW and; steps the State Government can take to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in the community.

RSL NSW will also reference its Sports & Recreation Program, which focuses on connection, camaraderie, and community building.

RSL NSW and its sub-Branches do not own or operate clubs, nor does RSL NSW benefit from the proceeds arising from the sale of alcohol or gambling.

RSL NSW thanks the Standing Committee into the Prevalence, Causes and Impacts of Loneliness in New South Wales for their consideration of this submission.

This submission is made on behalf of RSL NSW President, Mick Bainbridge, and RSL NSW CEO Giles Hurst.

Data Collection and Monitoring

Data collection and monitoring results to improve health outcomes is fundamental to ensuring that policies and frameworks are fit-for-purpose and working as intended. The NSW Government may consider existing sources of data in assessing the extent and causes of, and building its response to, social isolation and loneliness in NSW.

For example, the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide identified common feelings of social isolation and loneliness amongst current- and former-serving ADF personnel. In its Final Report, the Commissioners urged all government agencies to improve data collection, retention and sharing between government departments to develop more effective preventative policies.

RSL NSW is aware that the Census remains a Commonwealth responsibility, however, the State Government may seek to work with the Australian Bureau of Statistics, or utilise its data to identify trends and analyse responses to improve targeted initiatives to address social concerns such as social isolation and loneliness.

RSL NSW is also aware of the 2026 Census seeking information on ADF participation. It may be appropriate for the State Government to endorse the expansion of these questions focussing on loneliness and social isolation faced by current- and former-serving ADF personnel and their families to improve targeted initiatives and community outreach programs. This could also be expanded to other at-risk demographics who frequently experience these social issues.

Whilst previous census questions have focussed on mental health diagnoses, it has not sought to identify causes. By identifying social causes such as 'loneliness' or 'social isolation', it may assist States and Territories to address these concerns through targeted intervening and preventative policies and supports.

The State Government may also deploy surveys, similar to the 2022 Community and Wellbeing Survey, highlighting that loneliness and social isolation takes a toll both on those who experience these feelings, but also on the economic prosperity of the State.

A 2022 Report by the Mental Health Commission of NSW noted that those who are more likely to have pre-existing or underlying poor mental health are at an increased risk of experiencing chronic loneliness or social isolation and may not have the appropriate means to seek professional assistance.

These existing sources of data are useful, and the NSW Government may consider how these surveys could be conducted in a consistent and ongoing manner to inform its ongoing response to the issues of social isolation and loneliness.

Any state-based approaches undertaken by the NSW Government may require intergovernmental and interdepartmental assistance and collaboration from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Defence and DVA and any other relevant State or Commonwealth Department.

Veterans at Risk of Loneliness and Social Isolation

RSL NSW submits that veterans and their families are an at-risk cohort for loneliness and social isolation. There are several factors of the lifecycle, affecting both current- and post-service with the Australian Defence Force (ADF) that contribute to the risk of loneliness and social isolation for veterans and their families.

The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide has highlighted that the transition from Defence to civilian life poses significant risk of social isolation and loneliness. To combat this, ESOs, Local, State and the Commonwealth Governments must provide assistance to veterans and their families upon transition to ensure a smooth transition into civilian life.

"Many members continue to face cultural barriers and social isolation as they strive to integrate into the community outside the ADF, and for some, this can have lasting impacts¹."

Transition from Defence has been further identified as a 'very unsettling time, characterised by isolation, adapting to civilian life, loss of purpose, identity and tribe, changing familial responsibilities, a new employment context and poorer health outcomes².'

The importance of social connection for veterans and their families has been identified by multiple community organisations:

"Social support is really important for maintaining mental health and wellbeing. A lack of social support or social alienation, are also risk factors around mental health, including suicidality [...]. There is significant risk around social disconnection and social isolation³."

The importance of social connection and targeted initiatives has been highlighted in the Royal Commission, to even include the provision of service animals, noting that

'Social connection and targeted initiatives are a significant protective factor. Having an assistance dog also helped to prevent isolation due to chronic post-traumatic stress disorder⁴.'

'[Having] an assistance dog, saved my life on many occasions - and that isn't a figure of speech - he actively saved my life on many occasions⁵.'

RSL NSW submits that to ensure the safety and wellbeing of veterans and their families, and any other vulnerable cohort, there must be cost-effective and community based initiatives focussed on connection and community outreach to minimise the risks of social isolation and loneliness.

¹ Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, *Transition, DVA and support for ex-serving members*, (Report, 09 September 2024) <<https://defenceveteransuicide.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2024-09/final-report-volume-5.pdf> > [23.3].

² Ibid [23.11].

³ Evidence to the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, Hearing Block 6, Hobart (Professor David Forbes). Transcript of Proceedings, *Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide* [09 August 2023].

⁴ Private Submission, *Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide*, Department of Veterans' Affairs (Response to Notice to Give, NTG-DVA-093, Tranche 02, DVA.9999.0091.0001 AT 0003-006) [1.6].

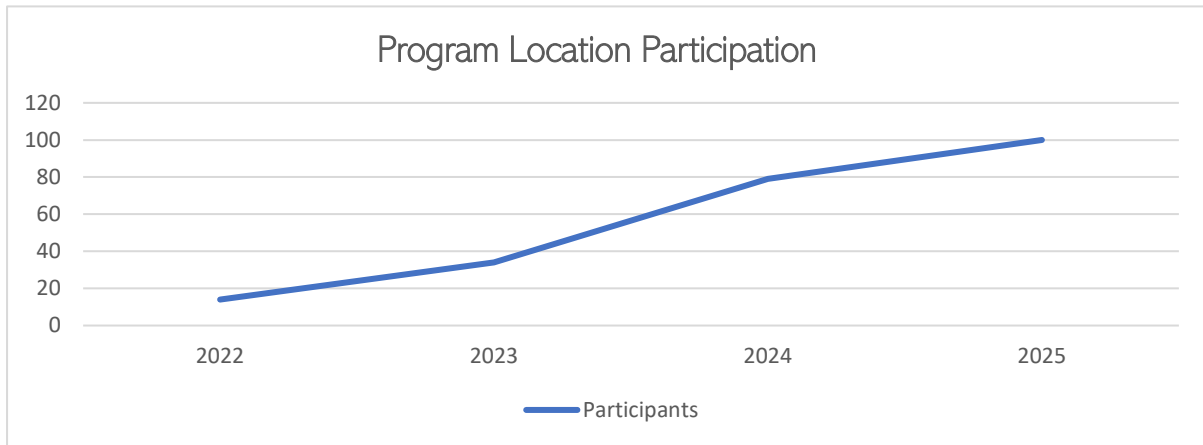
⁵ Transcript of Proceedings, *Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide* [01 December 2021].

Targeted Initiatives to Prevent Social Isolation

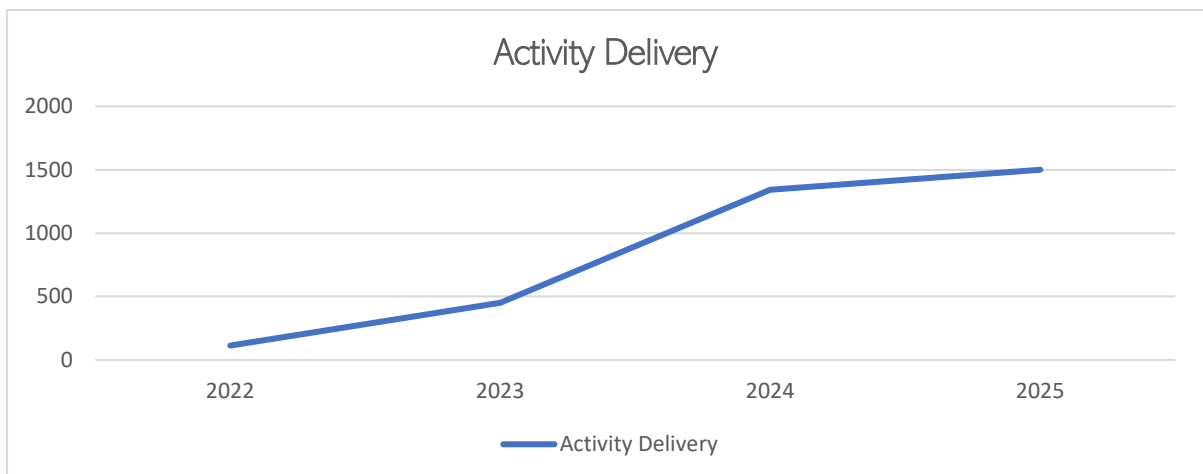
RSL NSW has established the Sports & Recreation Program to promote social connection and camaraderie, and prevent and minimise feelings of social isolation and loneliness.

The Sports & Recreation Program aims to grow membership and support veterans and their families, through participation in fun and healthy activities, including teams in fun runs such as the City2Surf, coffee catchups, golf days and other organised activities within RSL NSW’s sub-Branch network.

RSL NSW began its pilot of the Sports & Recreation Program in 2022, with 14 locations participating. This saw 113 activities delivered during this pilot phase. Due to the pilot’s success, RSL NSW rolled the program out across the state in 2023, with 82 locations participating in 2024. RSL NSW aims to reach 200 locations by the end of 2025.



Activity delivery has also increased since 2022, with 1,370 activities year to date. It is expected that by the end of 2024, activity delivery will exceed 1,500.



Testimonials sent to RSL NSW highlight the importance of the Sport & Recreation Program for participants:

*"We have had a rough year when my husband was diagnosed with PTSD. We have tried to keep things as "normal" as possible at home for the kids, and I find that most social and public events to be stressful and taxing on Cole**. I was so nervous about today, the crowds, the noises, the helicopters and the list goes on and how he might react. I know he was nervous too. I looked around at all the RSL shirts around us at the start line, and for the first time since all of this started, I felt like part of a community that would understand if Cole** started to panic or feel anxious. I can't describe how amazing that felt!*

You can sign us up for next year!"⁶

An RSL NSW sub-Branch has also highlighted the importance of the Sports & Recreation Program in providing opportunities for connection, camaraderie and social inclusion:

"On behalf of the RSL sub-Branch^, you are all doing a sensational job for the smaller sub-Branches, especially ours. It [the Sports and Recreation Program] is probably the best initiative the State Branch has come up with to attract members and to help mental health issues in getting members and their families out of the house and meeting up with like minded people. We have activities running nearly every day, including balance classes, gym, morning teas, walking groups which benefits our members greatly with their mental health and physical wellbeing.*

We also know as a fact that we have saved four lives that we know of as a result of this program."⁷

Another participant noted that the Sports & Recreation Program served as a 'great bonding session for my child and I, as well as an opportunity to meet up with people I haven't seen for a long time⁸."

RSL NSW also encourages sub-Branches to provide recreational days, with a Hunter-based sub-Branch providing feedback on their weekly 'coffee catch ups.'

"Last week, our coffee catchup had 35 members attend, we started at 19, and on average, we are signing a new member each week. These are younger veterans, 40+ and our membership has increased by 30 since we started. Many veterans are part of our golf days and one tells us how much he enjoys getting together with everyone and just having a laugh. I always leave the coffee catchups on a high!"⁹

The effectiveness of community-based, cost-effective social connection programs, such as the Sports & Recreation Program cannot be understated. Simple and cost-effective events are an example of targeted initiative aimed at fostering community engagement, decreasing social isolation, loneliness and improving mental health.

⁶ Electronic Mail from City to Surf Participant, to ANZAC House (RSL NSW), 16 August 2024.

** Names have been changed to protect the identity of the sender and participants.

⁷ Electronic Mail from sub-Branch President to ANZAC House (RSL NSW) 14 May 2024.

*^ Sub-Branch name has been redacted.

⁸ Electronic Mail from City to Surf Participant, to ANZAC House (RSL NSW), 15 August 2024.

⁹ Electronic Mail from sub-Branch Secretary, to ANZAC House (RSL NSW), 03 September 2024.

Government Response to Reduce Loneliness

RSL NSW recommends that the NSW Government seeks to improve community awareness around loneliness, its prevalence and impacts on the individual, and engage with community organisations to mitigate risks associated with social isolation and loneliness.

RSL NSW continues to monitor the progress of our Sports and Recreation Program and with expected growth, veterans and their families will continue to expand their social networks with other current- and former-serving ADF members. Where RSL NSW can, it may lend its expertise, knowledge and guidance to other community organisations to engage with their cohorts to decrease loneliness and social isolation.

Any Government response to address social isolation and loneliness will require collaborative efforts between Government and community groups. Working initiatives across State Government and community organisations will see a decrease in social isolation and loneliness experienced by at-risk cohorts.

It is also recommended that both State and Federal Governments continue to monitor the progress of the World Health Organisation Commission on Social Connection to identify international best practice.

The Commission on Social Connection aims to identify international best practice, address social isolation as a global public health priority and minimise the risks associated with social isolation and loneliness such as anxiety, depression, suicide, dementia, cardiovascular disease and stroke.¹⁰

Findings from the World Health Organisation may assist Local, State and Federal Governments in addressing social isolation and adopting best practice to minimise these risks to both veterans and their families, and other at-risk cohorts.

Closing Remarks

This submission has been guided by the Terms of Reference directing the Standing Committee into the Prevalence, Causes and Impacts of Loneliness in New South Wales.

Specifically, RSL NSW has addressed data collection and monitoring; veterans as an at-risk cohort; RSL NSW targeted initiatives; and proposed Government Responses.

The Royal Commission has noted the causes, prevalence and impacts of loneliness and social isolation post-transition and sometimes, during service. RSL NSW has worked with its sub-Branch network to encourage social connection, improve community outreach, and has established stronger connections with sub-Branches.

RSL NSW will continue to monitor the effectiveness of these targeted initiatives, continue to improve and expand existing programs, begin to trial further community connection days, and work with community organisations, State and Federal Government to continue the support of ADF personnel, veterans and their families.

Where the organisation holds capacity, RSL NSW may provide assistance to other non-government organisations and charities who seek to develop a similar program to combat social isolation and loneliness within their respective demographics.

¹⁰ World Health Organisation, *WHO Commission on Social Connection* (Web Page, n.d.) < <https://www.who.int/groups/commission-on-social-connection> >.