

Submission
No 46

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

Organisation: Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre Incorporated

Date Received: 31 October 2024



Submission to NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation.

Submission prepared by:

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Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre



Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation. I am willing to attend any hearing related to the Inquiry should you request this.

Introduction

Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre (NNIC) was established in 1978, incorporated in 1986 and is the primary support and community development organisation in Nimbin. At NNIC we welcome everyone, regardless of race, gender, sexuality, religion, age or social status and by our very nature build connections between individuals and organisations, particularly those who are isolated, vulnerable and disenfranchised.

Like many other Neighbourhood Centres in NSW, we provide a wide range of community support services but central to all that we do is the building of social connections and reducing social isolation, by providing a daily drop-in/cuppa tea; diverse volunteering experiences; facilitating community events, workshops and activities; connecting people to others and to services and support. We own and operate 7 Sibley St – Nimbin's Sustainable Living Hub and we also host the Nimbin AOD (Alcohol and Other Drugs) Hub at our Centre in partnership with The Buttery.

We also operate a Food Pantry and Soup Kitchen and an IT Hub with supported access to technologies.

We are located in a rural area and the nearest regional centre is Lismore, 35kms away. Public transport is limited and around 44% of residents have a median weekly household income of \$798 or less. 43% of residents live in single or lone person households. There is limited childcare in the area and no before or after school care. This places single parents at high risk of social isolation and exclusion from employment (*ABS 2021 Census*).

NNIC has a stewardship role in relation to the Sustainable Nimbin Community Plan – which is a community-led Plan consisting of 10 Focus Areas. In 2024 we facilitated a series of 8 community workshops for the purpose of reviewing and updating each of the focus areas, and at more than one of those workshops the issue of disruptions to community connections and consequential increased isolation caused by factors such as COVID, Disasters, work pressures and the overreliance on online communications, arose. In fact, increasing face-to-face communications was specifically identified as a strategy to counteract this disruption and since the revised SNCP was launched in September 2024, several new working groups and regular events have already been established – for example a monthly Food Swap at 7 Sibley St.

'Loneliness' and 'social isolation' are related but distinct concepts. In its 2020 White Paper, *Ending Loneliness Together* states that *'Loneliness is defined as an aversive and subjective feeling of social isolation that arises when an individual perceives that the quality or quantity of social relationships that they have is less than what they desire...Loneliness is not equivalent to social isolation, which is an objective measure of the number of friends, family, or other social connections that an individual has and the frequency of contact with these social connections. While social isolation and loneliness can both occur at the same time for an individual, they refer to different aspects of an individual's social relationships'* (*Ending Loneliness Together White Paper 2020, p.11*).

A comment from a respondent to our recent **Loneliness Survey** reflects this:

It's tough to get out of "my bubble", very comfortable with just being with myself, enjoying my own company, however I would like to join groups and/or networks sometimes to expand my friendship groups (no family in Aus and close friends live in Sydney), but there is just this big barrier I can't seem to overcome... I'm just unable to rock up and gather at an event. This becomes a vicious cycle and I become/feel isolated... (yes, I may have to discuss this with a professional..). If Nimbin Neighbourhood Centre has any ideas, suggestions to get people like me out of their bubble, please let me know! Thank you, you all do great work!

Terms of Reference

I address the Terms of Reference as follows:

1. Loneliness and social isolation in Nimbin

This section addresses the Terms of Reference, a, b, c, d, e:

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;

the identification of populations most at risk of loneliness and social isolation;

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;

evidence linking social connection to physical health;

factors that contribute to the development of transient loneliness into chronic loneliness.

Nimbin is an ageing community and we are slowly and sadly losing many of the community 'elders' who were instrumental in establishing the community as we know it, in the early seventies during and after the now famous Aquarius Festival (1973). Many residents of Nimbin live on rural land-sharing communities (aka Multiple Occupancies or 'MOs') or in rural locations in homes which can involve a degree of physical rigour to manage and even, in some cases, to access, thus leading to the risk of increased isolation and loneliness. Just like any other neighbourhood, people can fall out with their neighbours, however this can be intensified in the MO and rural contexts. We know that as people age they can become more isolated, as reflected in this comment from our recent **Loneliness Survey** (see below):

"I've been a Nimbinite for 44 years and it was never so lonely before. Covid did damage as does old age when no-one wants to know you anymore".

In May-June 2024 we conducted the annual **Community Wellbeing Survey** in Nimbin to which we had 218 responses.

The **Community Wellbeing Survey** is conducted by Neighbourhood Centres across NSW on an opt-in basis. The survey aims to reach the wider community and not specifically clients or service users of the Centre and measures sense of belonging, connections to community, trust and access to services. The survey was developed by the LCSA – the Peak Body for Neighbourhood and Community Centres, in partnership with the NSW Department of Communities and Justice.

47% agreed and 38% strongly agreed that they *feel connected to people in my local area*
35% agreed and 55% strongly agreed that *people in my area come together in times of need*; and
43% agreed and 38% strongly agreed that *people in my local area are willing to help their neighbours*.

39% agreed and 12% strongly agreed that they *participate in activities at the local neighbourhood centre*; and

53% agreed and 22% strongly agreed that they *participate in local activities other than at the local neighbourhood centre*.

50% agreed and 33% strongly agreed that *most community organisations in my local area can be trusted*.

Across all measures- i.e. belonging, participation, trust and access, **men consistently scored lower** than other groups. This suggests a potential gap in engagement and support for men within the community, highlighting an opportunity for targeted interventions focused on improving men's connection, trust, and participation in community life.

Men are less likely to participate in local activities, groups, or events. They are among the least likely to volunteer or take part in Neighbourhood Centre activities, and among the least likely to feel they contribute to the community.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents revealed a mix of high connection and accessibility, alongside significant barriers to trust, engagement, and perceived support. They reported a strong sense of Belonging and Accessibility **but** were less likely to feel that their neighbours are willing to help, and significantly less likely to participate in Neighbourhood Centre activities, community events, or volunteer, suggesting a gap in engagement and trust that could be addressed by fostering more culturally relevant, and inclusive activities and events.

People who identified as **living with a disability** scored the lowest across all measures compared to other groups.

Comments such as the following were common themes:

Being a part of Nimbin, going to town and being able greet (& be greeted) by name makes me feel remembered & valued; I feel like part of a large family and a wider community; Whenever you pass anyone in the street or by car people greet each other; Neighbour came over the other day, had got their 4WD bogged in steep paddock, asked if I could tow him up the hill with our community tractor. No worries, too easy; During the 2019 fires and the 2022 floods community came together very strongly; and I live on a MO and we help each other out and I also volunteer for Nimbin RFS.

But other comments reflected the barriers referred to above:

"I feel very isolated in my community. Some of the neighbours on my MO are semi hostile; and There is nothing here to help men talk about their stuff".

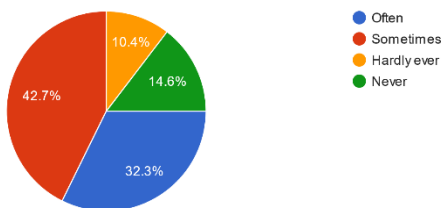
Overall, the qualitative data from the Community Wellbeing survey reflects a community that values its local support systems, particularly the NNIC and social media networks, for accessing resources and staying informed. However, barriers remain around healthcare accessibility, reliance on Facebook, and social inclusion for those without strong community connections.

Addressing these gaps could enhance the inclusivity and reach of community resources, particularly for more isolated individuals and those not using digital platforms.

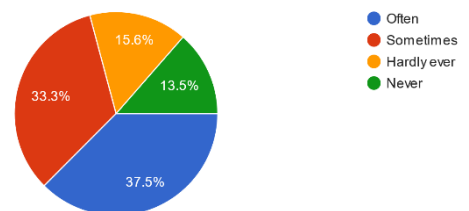
Seeking to dive deeper into the specific issue of loneliness in our community, NNIC recently facilitated an online conversation around the topic which resulted in a **Nimbin Loneliness Survey** we conducted for one week on a face to face (25 responses) and online basis (71 responses), with a view to increasing our understanding of the extent and nature of loneliness in our community. There were 96 responses in total. (See Appendix for Survey Demographics).

As you can see from the responses to the next 4 questions, over 70% of respondents indicated that they were sometimes or often affected by loneliness:

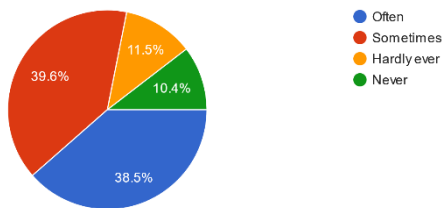
How often do you feel lonely?
96 responses



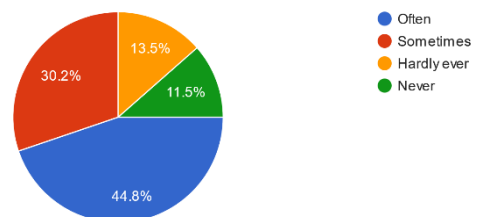
How often do you feel that you have nobody to talk to?
96 responses



How often do you feel left out?
96 responses



How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
96 responses



We are aware that women are more likely to seek out support or friendships and this survey further evidenced the findings of the Community Wellbeing Survey that men are a vulnerable cohort in the community with respect to loneliness. 37.5% respondents were male and some of the comments reflected this vulnerability:

“I have experienced a non-mutual family unit separation and relationship breakup. This has left me feeling lost, empty, depressed and alone. There is [sic] minimal spaces for men of our community to come together and open up”.

Similarly, 46 % of respondents said they are living with a disability, many of whom were in the older age brackets, indicating a link between loneliness, ageing and disability as isolation increasingly becomes an issue.

Comments online also confirmed the impact of recent disasters upon people:

“A lot of people like me who have been displaced by the floods are feeling very lonely while they try to plan a future and somehow get back to places and community they love e.g. Nimbin, Lismore”.

“Reading sites like this keeps us in touch but also missing the community we have had to leave through no fault of our own”.

The results of both surveys conducted in 2024 demonstrate there is more work to be done to reach out to those who are most vulnerable to loneliness in our community.

Physical and Mental Health and Loneliness

NNIC, in partnership with the Northern NSW Local Health District, ran a clinical dual diagnoses service (Mental Health and AOD) for 16 years at NNIC. The Nurse Practitioner retired in June 2023 and the service was wound down by the LHD. Since then however, we have rolled out a new AOD Hub in Nimbin in partnership with The Buttery, which provides a clinical service 5 days a week to people with Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) issues and their families and carers.

As a result, NNIC has a longstanding relationship with health services including our local GP Clinic and the local Hospital, and we regularly refer between one another. Many referrals from the Clinic or the Hospital relate to lower level mental health issues which require wrap-around support. For many of these people, isolation and lack of social connections is a primary issue contributing to their compromised mental and physical wellbeing. Additionally, some of the more vulnerable people need support to advocate for themselves in the health system or they simply will avoid it altogether, until their situation becomes highly acute, putting additional strain on Emergency Department resources.

We have seen that as mental wellbeing deteriorates so does physical wellbeing and vice versa.

Clinical workers at NNIC regularly refer clients into our volunteering programs as way of building confidence and connections. We have many case examples where people who started as our clients, became some of our most highly valued regular volunteers for whom becoming part of the team has completely turned their lives around.

2. Our approach to Loneliness and Isolation

This section addresses Terms of Reference g:

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

As already mentioned, NNIC undertakes many activities which primarily aim to connect people together and build community networks. Most of these are unfunded or only partly funded. And we definitely could be doing more if we had the resources.

Our Food Pantry and Soup Kitchen are clear examples of activities which reduce loneliness – See part 3 below.

Some further examples follow:

Welcome to Nimbin Kit

The Welcome to Nimbin Kit is maintained and distributed by NNIC. The aim of the Kit is to assist people who move to the Nimbin area connect in with the community including contact phone numbers and emails for services and facilities, venues and events, volunteering opportunities, disaster information, wildlife information and a lot more. Residents can use the Kit as a tool to



introduce themselves to new neighbours, or people can drop into NNIC to collect one, and the local real estate agents also distribute them to new residents.

Feedback from new residents has been overwhelmingly positive with many reporting that the Kit helped them significantly to orientate themselves in the community and find connections.

Disaster Response

Following the 2022 floods, whole sections of the Nimbin community became isolated from one another due to landslips and destroyed roads and access routes. NNIC was first on ground after the disaster and continues to provide response and recovery services and supports to the many impacted people in our area.

NNIC is an active member of the Nimbin Disaster Resilience Group (NDRG) and provides underlying support for the group – e.g. ownership and insurance of equipment, maintenance of volunteer training, verification of Work With Children Checks, auspicing funding and employing project staff.

Since the 2022 floods, the NDRG has established the Nimbin Community Care Team (CCT), which is auspiced by NNIC, and consists of volunteers trained and equipped to undertake welfare checks on their neighbours following a disaster event. The CCT is linked to the Nimbin Emergency Radio Network (also established since the 2022 floods) in case of the loss of normal communication systems such as telephone, mobile or internet networks. Both teams communicate directly with the RFS which is the primary Response Combat Agency in our area, as well as NNIC. NNIC's role is to initiate supports for identified needs relating to wellbeing, and the RFS role is to instigate emergency responses involving Combat Agency resources.

We are currently consulting with the CCT members to investigate the possibility for extending the role of the CCT in between disaster events, to undertake regular home visits upon people in their neighbourhoods who are vulnerable, including those experiencing loneliness, with the support of NNIC (and the consent of the residents). At present we lack the resources to implement this idea, however.

7 Sibley St project – Nimbin's Sustainable Living Hub

NNIC owns and operates this Project which is a strategy under the Sustainable Nimbin Community Plan. The community purchased the site in 2012 via a fundraising campaign led by NNIC - donations, raffles, art auctions and more raffles! Various activities happen at the site including regular workshops with a Sustainability focus, particularly around food and fibre production and processing, alternate building techniques, lost skills and arts. These workshops are themed around community interests and aim to build confidence, skills and community connections and networks.

In the 2023-2024 year we held 38 workshops, with 269 participants. 101 of them completed post workshop feedback surveys.

94% of participants surveyed reported increased confidence;

91% said they learned new skills to improve their life circumstances;

100% said they feel more connected to the community as a result of the workshop.

"I am a new resident. I learned so many new ideas and good to practice using tools".

"7 Sibley St is such a great hub for the community and for info and support".

Thanks Sibley St. This workshop has increased my disaster resilience and community connections.

Nimbin Death and Beyond – NNIC auspices this grassroots community group which is committed to supporting and empowering people in their personal choices surrounding death and dying. The group worked for over 10 years to purchase a community-owned cooling plate for use in home deaths. The cooling plate is kept at NNIC and is available for hire by community members should the need arise. The plate was purchased in 2023 and has been used three times so far. It has also served as an engagement tool in community meetings and workshops, which are very well attended, indicating the high level of interest in the topic in an ageing community. NNIC manages the funds for the group and insures the cooling plate.

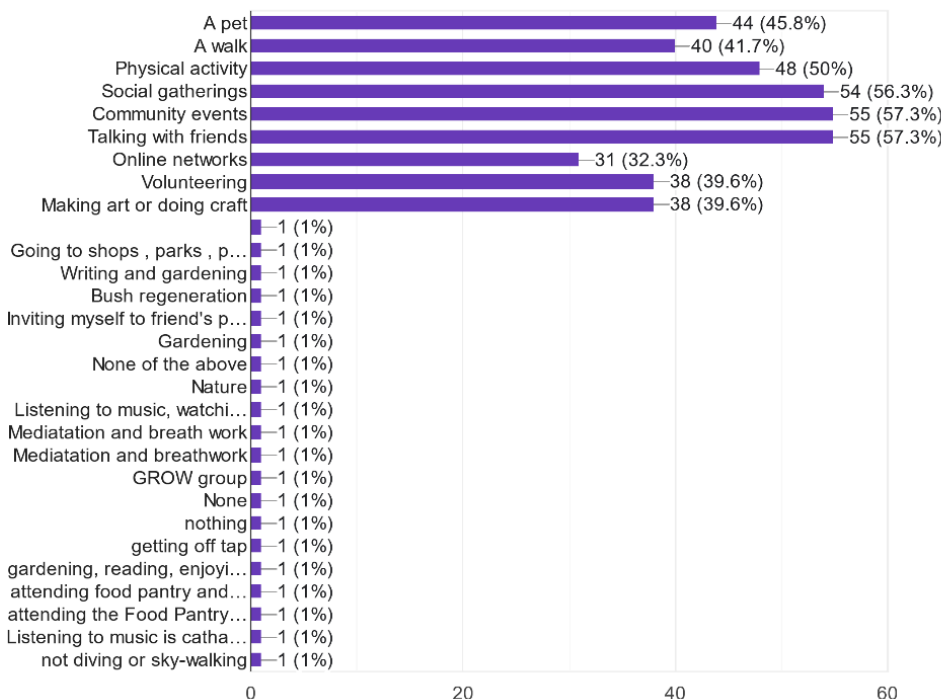
3. Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre

This section addresses Terms Of Reference j:

steps that community, technology/social media companies, organisations, and individuals can take to reduce impact of loneliness on individuals and the community

In the **Nimbin Loneliness Survey**, we asked people **what has helped them** to overcome feelings of loneliness?:

Have you found any of the following things helpful to overcome the feeling of loneliness? (tick all that apply)
96 responses



Social gatherings, community events and talking with friends rated almost equally at 56.3%, 57.3% and 57.3% respectively, compared to 31.6% indicating online networks. Pets and physical activity also rated highly, with volunteering and making art/craft at almost 40% each.

Comments included:

“I have always felt deeply lonely until I came to Nimbin. I still spend the same amount of time alone, but I

don't feel lonely any more. So many smiles in the Main Street, so many colourful events, so much kindness, that loneliness can't take hold”.



"I really love the Food Pantry days and Soup Kitchen too. The service is great and it has become an important part of my life, giving me a sense of social connection and emotional wellbeing".

"I love the social connections I get from attending the food pantry and soup kitchen. Some of the best conversations I get all week are at the food pantry and soup kitchen days".

"I love the soup kitchen on Fridays. I get to catch up with people and have a chat. The vege soup is very delicious".

"I love the Neighbourhood centre & regularly access the internet, photocopier & Centrelink office".

"I'm generally happy in my own company but am aware that with the death of several close friends over the years and my growing disability I am isolated. Thanks to the help of [NNIC's Community Worker], I have received support for my independent living and have been able to get out more. So thank you for having such vital services as her caring help. I wasn't just a cog in the system. She saw the person before her".

"How thankful I am and how blessed our little village is to have the neighbourhood centre and all the amazing workers and volunteers, you guys really are the backbone of our community".

"A million thanks for the good work you do".

"Thanks for thinking of the lonely x "

"Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this survey and for all you do for the community".

As **place-based, locally-led organisations**, Neighbourhood Centres have an enormous role to play to reduce the impacts of loneliness at the individual and community level. As organisations which are embedded in our communities, highly trusted and with a strong social license, Neighbourhood Centres are well positioned to grapple with the complex issue of loneliness.

As discussed, NNIC runs many social activities that reduce loneliness in our community, including the annual Women's Dinner, the Big Free Community Xmas Lunch, Nimbin NAIDOC Day; the weekly Food Pantry and Soup Kitchens, plus regular weaving circles, singing circles, craftnoons, weekly workshops and the monthly Food Swap at 7 Sibley St.

Most of these activities are unfunded or only partly funded.

NNIC works together with a wide range of community organisations, businesses, local schools and regularly partners with organisations and agencies including Health agencies such as the Nimbin GP Clinic, Nimbin Hospital, the NSW Local Health District, The Buttery and many others to achieve community goals.

Volunteering plays a major role in reducing social isolation in Nimbin. NNIC's activities involve over 50 volunteers per year giving around 100 hours per week, valued \$225,000 per year (source: Cost of Volunteering Calculator: Centre for Volunteering Australia). We also link people into volunteering opportunities with other organisations in Nimbin.

Around 30% of our volunteers are referred by client workers to address social isolation and/or confidence issues. Such volunteers require significant support to ensure their experience is empowering for them.

One such volunteer said “I’ve been volunteering at NNIC for over 2 years and volunteering has helped me create a path to connection and community. I’ve found that feelings of loneliness stem from feeling disconnected from the community and world around us. Helping others through volunteering helps you feel less lonely and allows you to have a sense of mission and purpose in life. Volunteering offers a pathway to finding new social connections that can help to alleviate that sense of loneliness. I’ve found volunteering is one of the best ways to reconnect with yourself and others.”

Many of our volunteers obtain employment as a result of their volunteering at NNIC, including at NNIC. Volunteering can create a pathway out of loneliness and into employment:

“I was struggling with loneliness before I started working at NNIC. I had finished my studies, my kids were growing up all in high school, I had two long bouts of illness which saw me isolated at home on my rural property. I had lost connection with my social circles as I was no longer actively involved at my kids’ primary school. I wanted a job but I lacked the confidence to search for one as it had been so long since I had been in the workforce having chosen to stay home to care for my kids. I eventually volunteered at 7 Sibley St, starting a monthly basket weaving group, where I found I was not the only one...with many participants openly expressing the role the weaving group played in easing their loneliness. This built my confidence to apply for a paid job at NNIC, which I successfully obtained.

In the **Nimbin Loneliness Survey**, we also asked people if they had any suggestions as to what more could be done to ease loneliness. The general theme of **more opportunities for people to get together and make friends in a largely unstructured way** came through strongly:

A group for those that are feeling social isolation, gatherings for people that would like to meet people that are also feeling lonely, a group for overcoming barriers for social anxiety or to understand why they are lonely

Monthly social get-together

Friendship club where lonely people get to meet other lonely people

Gatherings or events for older people who aren’t quite ready for the aged care events

Men’s Group, Men’s Shed

Regular social groups just for a chat and catch up

More picnics, teas, and weekend social groups for people who work

Smaller events including for people who struggle with larger community events due to e.g. hearing issues

More regular gatherings with food such as the Food Pantry and Soup Kitchen.

Another suggestion raised several times was some kind of outreach/home visit service for people who may be isolated:

Welfare checks on elder members of our community. Letterbox drop invites to gatherings/ services / free stuff for single mums/ others that seem isolated or struggling

Buddy system for elderly or disabled community members who have trouble leaving home - simple as a cup of tea once a week at a regular time. Match able bodied people who feel lonely with housebound people.

4. Neighbourhood Centres, Loneliness and Social Isolation

This section addresses Terms of Reference h and i:

steps the State Government can take to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in the community;

developments in other jurisdictions regarding the implementation of policies and initiatives relevant to the treatment of loneliness as a public health issue.

The most significant 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 Centres in NSW.

As stated above, many of our key activities which contribute to community connectedness and reduce isolation are unfunded or only partly funded. For example, our Community Development Worker is employed for 6 hours a week to manage the 7 Sibley St project, but volunteers many more hours than what she is paid for and struggles to stay off Centrelink benefits herself. The Manager is paid for less than half the hours involved in running the Centre which is a barrier to succession planning. The bookkeeper is paid for 6 hours per week. Overall, the overheads and management costs of NNIC are significantly underfunded and simply keeping the rent paid and the doors open from one year to the next is an ongoing challenge. The time and energy spent on constantly chasing funds purely to survive would be far better spent on working with the community.

If the NSW Government invested further into NNIC, it would increase our sustainability and flexibility and our capacity to respond to community needs. It would enable us to reliably plan for activities rather being dependent upon whatever goodwill we can muster at any one time. Increased funding would also enable us to grow our role as a primary community connector by e.g: running more social groups and activities for vulnerable cohorts such as young people, single parents, men, older people and expanding the role of the Community Care Team. We could start a homework club to support some of our single parents with kids who are struggling with school and are at risk of disengaging and broker or arrange childcare for events and activities to enable single parents to be included. We could support local men to establish a men's support group.

As loneliness and social isolation increases in society post-pandemic, through the current cost of living crisis, acute housing crisis and rise of mental health struggles, Neighbourhood Centres are the most ideal social infrastructure to be leveraged to reduce social isolation and loneliness in NSW communities.

Despite the enormous impact Neighbourhood Centres have in reducing social isolation in NSW, we currently receive no core funding from the NSW Government – one of the last states in Australia where this is the case. We are reliant on program or project funding which is often short-term and inflexible and does not allow for management costs.

The peak body for NSW Neighbourhood and Community 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 would mean that all Neighbourhood Centres can respond to social isolation and loneliness however it manifests in their communities, which we know is not uniform. Local communities need to be empowered, through local Neighbourhood Centres, to unite and develop solutions tailored to their needs and specifics, together from the ground up. Every community is different and has its challenges but also its own strengths which Neighbourhood Centres are best placed to identify, and to build upon those strengths.

In 2022, the Queensland Government delivered core funding to all Neighbourhood Centres in Queensland, at \$230,000 per centre, per year. This was partially in response to recommendations from the Queensland 2021 Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness, in recognition of the central role Neighbourhood Centres play in reducing social isolation and loneliness. This funding model allows Neighbourhood Centres the flexibility and longevity required to keep the doors open and respond nimbly to community needs.

5. Conclusion

Neighbourhood Centres are the beating hearts of our local communities. The best work we do in reducing loneliness is largely unfunded and therefore not recognised or acknowledged. We work with our communities and tailor everything we do to our specific communities' needs and goals. Our capacity to undertake more of our best work is severely hampered by the fact that we must spend so much time trying to source funds to pay the overheads and management costs which are largely unfunded.

Any strategy to address loneliness and social isolation in the future should ensure that these local, welcoming, place-based organisations are front and centre, creating vital connection, healthy relationships and belonging for all people in NSW. Our Centre supports LCSA's recommendations to this Inquiry that positions Neighbourhood and Community Centres as key social infrastructure to address social isolation and loneliness.

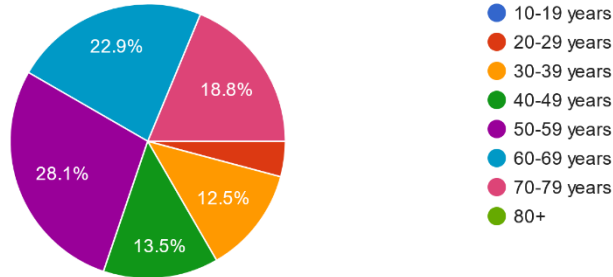
Please do not hesitate to contact me with any queries you may have.

Natalie Meyer, Manager, Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre

Appendix – NNIC Loneliness Survey - Demographics

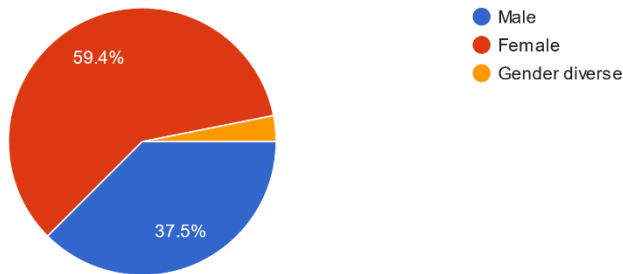
Your age

96 responses



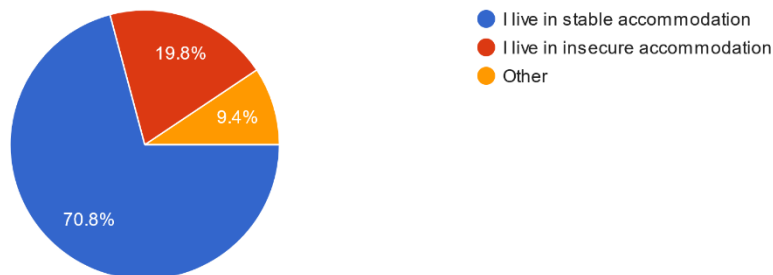
Your gender

96 responses



Housing status

96 responses



Choose any of the following that apply to you

96 responses

