

Submission  
No 48

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

**Organisation:** Boambee East Community Centre Inc.

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## **Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation**

**Submission by  
Boambee East Community Centre Inc.**

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Boambee East Community Centre Inc.

## INTRODUCTION

The Boambee East Community Centre Inc. (BECC) is a not-for-profit community hub located in the southern suburbs of the Coffs Harbour Local Government Area (LGA). We provide support and services to our local community, primarily suburbs residing within the 2452 postcode, although we also facilitate activities throughout the LGA, including the more remote rural and coastal areas surrounding Coffs Harbour.

For the past 25 years, we have worked with our local community, to build a strong, resilient, resourceful and creative community, with particular emphasis on people at vulnerable life stages.

We recognise that loneliness and social isolation are related but distinct concepts that can only be addressed by services and programs that address both issues. As such, the services and programs we deliver and facilitate aim to reduce both social isolation (through accessible community-directed programs and services that evolve as the needs of our community members change and evolve) and loneliness (by ensuring these are delivered in a safe and inclusive way).

Our programs and services include:

- ☞ providing information, advocacy, referrals and support to community members, so they have access to the supports and services they need to reduce loneliness and social isolation,
- ☞ facilitating safe and inclusive social programs and activities that bring people together and enable them to connect to each other and their community, reducing loneliness and social isolation,
- ☞ planning and facilitating annual community events including our Annual Winter Solstice family fun day and our Children's Halloween Party that reduce social isolation, and
- ☞ providing a wonderful opportunity for volunteers to develop experience and skills while contributing to their community and developing connections with other volunteers and their community.

The most significant challenge we face with continuing to provide community services and programs that effectively address social isolation and loneliness in our community is consistent and adequate funding.

As a community centre in NSW, we receive an extremely low level of ongoing funding through the targeted early intervention (TEI) program, enough to cover only one full time equivalent staff member (3 days per week for our Manager and 2 days per week for our office administrator/bookkeeper). All other staff involved with administering our programs and services are volunteers.

We have been advised that our existing ongoing TEI funding is at risk, given plans to increase the focus of this program on early intervention and remove "provide a community centre" as a program activity.

The key groups identified under the proposed TEI guidelines include Aboriginal children, young people, families, and communities; children aged 0 to 5; young people at risk of disengaging from school, family, and community; young parents facing known vulnerabilities or experiencing various hardships; and children and young people affected by mental health conditions. However, it's important to note that this focus does not encompass older community members and other families who are also impacted by economic vulnerability, loneliness, and social isolation. We believe that addressing these additional needs is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and supportive community for all.

Most of our existing community services and programs are funded by ad hoc grants and a small amount of donations and fundraising income. Applying for, managing and acquitting multiple, ad hoc grants every year, on top of complying with existing reporting, workplace, health and safety, governance and other obligations, requires a significant investment of time and places considerable stress to our staff and volunteers.

We also note that the amount of funding available under some of the existing grant programs continues to shrink.

With consistent and adequate funding, there is so much more that we could do to reduce loneliness and isolation in our community.

## LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION IN OUR AREA

The areas we support at BECC are characterised by high rates of disadvantage, including dense social housing, low-income levels, and youth disengagement with education and unemployment. Young people and seniors locally, as well as those in the smaller rural and localities we reach out to, experience loneliness and social isolation stemming from a lack of transport and services. The cost of participating in community programs and activities can be a significant barrier for our community members on low incomes.

The experience of feeling lonely has been attributed as a risk factor for poorer mental and physical health. In the NSW Mental Health Commission's [2022 Community Wellbeing Survey](#), nearly 40% of residents in NSW reported experiencing varying degrees of loneliness, with individuals facing mental health issues being almost twice as likely to feel isolated.

More than 50% of those with a mental health challenge surveyed by the North Coast Primary Health Network (which covers our area) identified that support or social groups were difficult to access due to cost and lack of services.

Taken together, these statistics indicate that more programs are needed in our area to address the loneliness and social isolation that can be experienced by those with mental health challenges and can lead to reduced life expectancy.

We note an additional outcome of the most recent mental health survey by the north Coast Primary Health Network indicates that the highest rate of suicide in the Coffs Harbour area is within the 65 to 74-year-old age group. This age group is not a key target group for TEI funding.

Domestic violence is also recognised as a significant cause of loneliness and social isolation for those impacted. Perpetrators of abuse commonly isolate their victims from family and friends. What is less well understood is that family and friends will often 'freeze out' the survivor. A third dynamic that completes the isolation triangle is that survivors will commonly isolate themselves from social contacts due to depression, low self-esteem and a sense of helplessness that can accompany abuse. Finally, it can be a challenge for those escaping domestic violence to integrate into a new community.

Rates of Domestic and Family Violence in the Coffs Clarence Police District, which includes our local communities, were 1.8 times the state average between April 2023 and March 2024. The 10-year trend for Domestic and Family Violence related assault in this district shows an average per annum increase of 5.7 per-cent resulting in more and more people are at risk of experiencing loneliness and social isolation in our area due to experiencing domestic violence.

## OUR APPROACH TO ADDRESSING LONELINESS AND ISOLATION IN OUR COMMUNITY

One of the most important services provided by Neighbourhood Centres and Community centres such as BECC is referral to organisations that can help our community members to address issues that exacerbate feelings of loneliness and isolation, such as mental health services, disability services, financial advice and assistance, and assistance with domestic violence. We also provide advocacy services to help community members access community or Government services and entitlements.

Our safe, inclusive space, which is completely accessible for individuals with disabilities, is a perfect place for individuals to meet and interact, foster relationships and build community. Our regular activities and events help people forge new friendships and find joy in their lives. Most of the activities that we provide are free of cost and run by volunteers.

Our facility at BECC includes office spaces, kitchen facilities with commercial appliances, and a large, airy, hall with covered outdoor areas and comprehensive AV facilities which can be hired by community members and other community service organisations for activities that also reduce loneliness and social isolation.

As a Community Centre, we are also committed to offering valuable opportunities for **Volunteers** to gain experience and develop new skills while making a positive impact in their community. Our diverse group of volunteers comes from all walks of life, with many eager to contribute to meaningful change. For others, volunteering is a way to forge connections and foster a sense of belonging.

Programs that we manage at BECC that have a direct impact on loneliness and social isolation include:

- ☞ one of the largest seniors' social groups in the Coffs Harbour local government area,
- ☞ arts-based resilience programs for girls aged 8-14,
- ☞ a Scrabble group,
- ☞ school holiday programs for youth, and
- ☞ an old-time dance group.

Our vibrant seniors' group, called **Chinwaggers**, meets weekly and has been thriving for over 12 years under the stewardship of the wonderful Margaret Bridgman, a dedicated senior volunteer. This program currently has around 70 members, with 35-40 attendees on any given day and up to 100 attendees at special events.

Weekly group activities include guest speakers, celebrations of significant annual events, such as Christmas in July and Melbourne Cup, and outings to local attractions and locations outside of the Coffs Harbour Local Government Area. A good feed is an intrinsic part of every gathering.

A weekly email to members includes information about program changes, interesting news, and notable life events. A monthly newsletter is circulated among members, local nursing homes and other senior groups throughout the Coffs LGA.

Margaret, through her unwavering support and leadership of this group, has cultivated a nurturing environment, that promotes friendship, safety, and a strong sense of belonging which helps to alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation among our members.

As one appreciative participant recently noted: *“Over the past 12 years you have led us with Chinwaggers with these weekly social events. Sometimes these are even more frequent and always enjoyable and interesting. Our Senior group comes from all walks of life, from many different areas and together you have melded us into an exciting, fun-loving, warm, and friendly*

*group. Many new friendships have flourished. Boambee East Community Centre has given an avenue for friendship and support and given us a sense of belong to so many of us seniors who have come to start a new life in Coffs Harbour. We have been taken on a journey of discovery, visiting so many of the wonderful facets of Coffs Harbour and surrounding areas. Tourism at its very best. Interesting and informative guest speakers, and very helpful topics and we have lots of fun too."*

Our **Girls Resilience Education Art Time (GREAT) program** is a weekly after-school girls' circle designed for young girls aged 8 to 14, featuring activities throughout the year. This initiative was inspired by local parents who witnessed the profound impact of bushfires, hailstorms, and the pandemic on their children, leading to isolation from peers.

The program addresses important topics such as resilience, self-esteem, body image, emotional intelligence, grief and loss, and the social isolation many young people feel, particularly in school. It enables them to share experiences, grow together, and establish lasting friendships.

By meeting regularly in a safe, supportive and inclusive environment, these young girls—many from diverse cultural backgrounds and with complex childhood traumas — can express their feelings and develop strategies to navigate their teenage years successfully.

A high percentage of our participants are neurodivergent, and parents have reported that *"GREAT provides a valuable opportunity for their young ones to engage in a social activity, particularly through art, that helps to build resilience, create connections and reduce anxiety surrounding social situations."*

The program gently explores issues relevant to this age group while engaging participants in self-discovery through various art projects. The friendships facilitated by this program have also led to connections among parents of the girls who've participated.

As this program falls outside the criteria for our core TEI funding, it was funded for a short period of through resilience funding, but this is now longer available. Given the positive feedback from parents and participants, and to ensure it remains accessible to our community, we continue to offer it monthly, funded by hall hire fees and the fundraising efforts of our dedicated volunteers.

With universal core funding of community centres in NSW, we could potentially provide this program more frequently (e.g. weekly), for more participants, and provide a similar program for girls aged 12 to 18.

We presently facilitate two large annual community events that are a significant drawcard for local community members, due to their low cost, range of family friendly activities, and accessibility. Such events can have a significant impact on social isolation within a community and we would love to expand in this space by adding additional events aimed at older, isolated members of the community. Furthermore, these events create opportunities for volunteering, fostering teamwork and camaraderie, which positively enhances participants' sense of belonging and connection.

We would also love to commence a social group for women in our community, targeting young mothers and families, including those experiencing loneliness and isolation stemming from domestic violence. Universal core funding of community centres in NSW could enable us to offer such an activity.

Significant costs for activities can be a significant barrier for our local families and seniors and therefore limit the effectiveness of our programs that aim to reduce loneliness and social

isolation, given we are surrounded by areas experiencing high level of disadvantage. As such we have and wish to continue our practice of making access to our programs as low cost as possible or free for our community participants.

In addition to the programs, we manage and fund ourselves, we provide low-cost hire of our facilities to community organisations, such as:

- ☞ local church groups on weekends,
- ☞ several local arts and crafts groups during the week, including a U3A arts group,
- ☞ recreational and other groups, such hula hooping, sword fighting, and yoga activities
- ☞ government organisations, such as Service NSW for community outreach activities,
- ☞ cultural singing, language and dance groups, and
- ☞ government funded programs, such as Stepping on for Seniors.

Low-cost hire of our facilities is also available for community members for events, parties or milestone celebrations, such as significant birthdays, wakes, and weddings. These activities also bring families and our local community together.

The maintenance and modernisation of our centre facilities and grounds is funded entirely by the facilities hire fees we collect and by ad hoc grants.

This space also enables us to offer our local community access to Child and Family Health clinics, free tax help for low-income individuals, Indigenous programs, including after school language support for local Gumbaynggirr children, playgroups, no interest loans through NILS for low-income earners, Parents Next, and much more.

## WHAT WE THINK OUR COMMUNITY NEEDS

As grass roots organisations, deeply embedded and connected within our local communities, with well-established community networks and existing available infrastructure, community centres such as BECC are ideally placed to provide services, activities and programs that address loneliness and social isolation in the community.

We have and continue to facilitate programs and services with this aim but the need for more support in this area has grown and continues to grow post-COVID. Increasing loneliness and social isolation due to the current cost of living crisis, acute housing shortages and other challenges, such as domestic violence, have contributed to an enormous and ever increasing societal mental health burden.

In our view, 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 Centres/Community Centres, such as ours, in NSW.

Despite the impact we already have in reducing isolation and the enormous potential of community centres to effect change in this space, we presently receive no core funding from the NSW Government. NSW is one of the last states in Australian where this is the case.

Universal core funding would mean less time spent chasing short-term and often inflexible funding and more time to make a real difference to community members experiencing loneliness and social isolation through:

- ☞ developing and implementing more effective, locally targeted programs; and
- ☞ expanding the target audience and/or frequency of existing program offerings.

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

<b>Core funding element</b>	<b>Cost per LCSA member organisation p.a.</b>	<b>Cost for 175 LCSA members p.a.</b>
EO (SCHADS 8.1, 32 hr/wk)	\$120,901	\$21,157,719
Community Development Worker (SCHADS 5.1)	\$111,984	\$19,597,177
Admin workers (SCHADS 3.1, 15 hr/wk)	\$33,503	\$5,863,016
Operational contribution	\$50,000	\$8,750,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$316,388</b>	<b>\$55,367,912</b>