

**Submission
No 51**

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

Organisation: Lake Macquarie City Council

Date Received: 31 October 2024



30 October 2024

Hon Dr Sarah Kaine MLC
Chair
Standing Committee on Social Issues
Submitted via online form

Dear Dr Kaine

Subject: Lake Macquarie City Council Staff Submission – Parliamentary Inquiry into the Prevalence, Causes and Impacts of Loneliness in NSW

Introduction

Lake Macquarie City Council staff welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Prevalence, Causes and Impact of Loneliness in NSW.

Lake Macquarie City Council is the largest local government area (LGA) by population in the Hunter region. Home to more than 220,000 people, Lake Macquarie is a geographically dispersed city and provides access to 123 playgrounds, eight libraries, 108 sporting facilities and 36 community buildings for residents and visitors alike to connect with others.

Council staff have provided three recommendations to improve the effectiveness of local government in connecting the people that live, work and play in our communities.

Recommendations:

- 1.** Provide additional funding to local government to promote the delivery of best practice community capacity building programs, activities, and social infrastructure projects.
- 2.** Develop an 'Ending Loneliness and Social Isolation Strategy' that acknowledges the role of the local government sector.
- 3.** Develop a NSW community building evaluation framework aligned to the federal Measuring What Matters Framework, enabling local government to evaluate the success of their preventative health and community capacity building projects.

Our Ref: D11744672 Your Ref:

Conclusion

Social isolation and loneliness are serious health concerns that do not discriminate. Councils are significant community capacity builders but are not resourced or positioned to be a sole solution to the loneliness crisis the people of NSW are experiencing. Our recommendations reflect the role local governments could play in addressing these concerns as well as acknowledging the limitations without support of all levels of government.

Should you require further information on this submission, please contact David Hughes, Director Built and Natural Assets on _____ or by email

Yours sincerely

Morven Cameron
Chief Executive Officer

Lake Macquarie City Council Staff Submission – Parliamentary Inquiry into the Prevalence, Causes and Impacts of Loneliness in NSW

Introduction

Lake Macquarie City Council staff welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Prevalence, Causes and Impact of Loneliness in NSW.

Lake Macquarie City Council is the largest local government area (LGA) by population in the Hunter region. Home to more than 220,000 people, Lake Macquarie is a geographically dispersed city and provides access to 123 playgrounds, eight libraries, 108 sporting facilities and 36 community buildings allowing residents and visitors to connect with others.

We are a council that works hard to deliver innovative opportunities for community connection and access to fulfilling and socially connected lives, but we know more needs to be done if we are going to reduce the prevalence, causes and impact of loneliness in NSW. However, this is only possible if the role of council's is clear and they are adequately resourced to do so.

Council staff understand that almost 1 in 3 Australians feels lonely and that loneliness does not discriminate¹. We also understand that the experience of loneliness is different to that of social isolation.

Council staff's aim of this submission is to demonstrate the capability of local government in the fight to reduce and eliminate experiences of loneliness and social isolation, however, also acknowledge the limitations of local government in solving such an important issue. We believe local government needs to be viewed as more than just a key stakeholder and acknowledged for the sector's efforts in delivering effective preventative health measures, particularly through adequate resourcing.

This submission will also highlight relevant programs and projects that Lake Macquarie City Council has implemented in recent years to build social connections and reduce rates of loneliness and social isolation across our local government area.

¹ Ending Loneliness Together (2023). State of the Nation Report -Social Connection in Australia 2023. <https://lonelinessawarenessweek.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/state-of-nation-social-connection-2023.pdf>

Recommendations

1. Provide additional core funding to local government to promote the delivery of best practice community capacity building programs, activities, and social infrastructure projects.

This submission highlights the strategic position of the local government sector to address challenges associated with public health concerns such as loneliness and social isolation.

Council staff are advocating for core funding that enables us to produce community events, social inclusion programs and the improvement of social infrastructure to address the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in NSW. While local government cannot solve loneliness in our communities, with adequate resourcing, we can build communities and have a positive impact in the lives of those who live, work and play in our area.

2. Develop an ‘Ending Loneliness and Social Isolation Strategy’ that acknowledges the local government sector.

The ‘Frome Model of Care’ from the UK is an outstanding example leveraging existing social networks to improve health outcomes on a local government level. Over five years, this model saw a 14 per cent reduction in emergency presentations compared to a 28 per cent increase in other areas of the region by implementing an Asset Based Community Development framework that connected people to their community in meaningful ways². It is recommended this strategy be aligned to an evaluation framework as discussed in Recommendation 3 of this submission.

3. Develop a NSW community capacity building evaluation framework that is aligned to the Measuring What Matters Framework.

If implemented and funded adequately, local governments will be able to effectively evaluate the success of their preventative health and community capacity building projects in a standardised and consistent way. This will support future funding proposals as well as provide government vital data on how Asset Based Community Development initiatives can reduce the impact of loneliness and social isolation.

This framework would support governments in articulating how loneliness is a curable public health issue, more than the appointment of a Minister for Loneliness for example, which is unlikely to produce immediate action at the source of the problem. This framework, which

² <https://relationshipsproject.org/project/frome/>

could sit with and be funded by the NSW Ministry of Health, would allow the sector to deliver and evaluate what we already know works, with adequate oversight and direction from the NSW Government.

How Lake Macquarie City Council reduces loneliness and social isolation using an Asset Based Community Development framework:

1. Social Infrastructure that has capacity to change lives: Windale Hub and Landcare and Sustainable Living Centre

The Windale Hub, bilyabayi³, is Lake Macquarie's newest high-tech community hub featuring flexible social spaces, contemporary library services and multi-purpose community facilities. It was built to replace the old library and community centre, and it now includes facilities such as a cafe, a multipurpose hall and spaces to work and socialise. The space also includes access to a local, not for profit community services provider who assists people with service navigation, community connection and emergency relief. The success of Windale Hub is notable given it's situated in a community which yields a stigma associated with a suburb that lacks access to adequate social and public infrastructure. This community asset opened in August 2024 and Council is excited to share future insights into how this space has changed people's lives through social connection and skill building.

Another example of an innovative social infrastructure project in Lake Macquarie City is the establishment of the Landcare and Sustainable Living Centre, umali barai-ku ('to do for the earth' in Awabakal language)⁴, which is a state-of-the-art facility that gives the community access to information and engagement activities on environmental and sustainability issues. The site is home to one of the largest Landcare volunteer networks in Australia.

The development of Australia's first Wellbeing Framework released in 2023 creates a timely opportunity for the development of a national standardised evaluation framework that measures the health and wellbeing of our communities from a local government perspective. A national and or statewide reporting framework that is aligned to Australia's Measuring what Matters Initiative would provide a platform for local government to appropriately resource, report on and measure their community wellbeing and

³ <https://www.lakemac.com.au/Venues/Windale-Hub>

⁴ <https://www.lakemac.com.au/Venues/Landcare-and-Sustainable-Living-Centre-umali-barai-ku>

infrastructure projects, and for the Federal and State Government to ensure appropriate funding avenues are provided to support councils in delivery of these initiatives and work towards reducing the rates of loneliness and social isolation in NSW.

2. Connecting people more vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness through sports and arts: 'IncludingYOU' Programs'.

The IncludingYOU program collaborates with internal and external stakeholders to engage people of all abilities who may be experiencing social isolation in the Lake Macquarie area. The arts program runs over 12-weeks and has received some excellent feedback including:

- **93 per cent** of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the program connects them to others and encourages them to explore new places in the community,
- **100 per cent** believe the new skills learned will improve their lives (e.g., living healthier, more independently, or being happier),
- One comment from a support worker who stated *“this is the most inclusive, welcoming group I have attended in 20 years of support working. The participant I work with has begun traveling here via train, encouraging her independence and meeting new friends. We would be devastated if this group no longer existed.”*

The sports program, which commences in late 2024, partners with the regions premier sporting facilities to produce the 'Play Well Program' at the Hunter Sports Centre, kaiyungkiliko.

With easy access to council owned, operated, or closely aligned community resources such as libraries, galleries and sports facilities, these programs harness the strengths of people's creative and active capabilities to ignite social connection and offer a first-class example of Asset Based Community Development in action through the unique lens of local government.

3. Activating third spaces to build communities through hobbies and interests

Lake Macquarie City Council design programs and activities using a place-based approach and deliver offerings that council staff are proud to label innovative and consistent; two key ingredients to activating 'third spaces' (physical spaces in addition to homes and workplaces that offer connection through activities) and bringing people together.

In addition to the standard offerings at libraries and galleries, one of the more innovative programs on offer through our Windale Hub is the 'The Fab Lab' which is an educational, digital fabrication space and the first of its kind in regional New South Wales. It joins more

than 1700 Fab Labs around the world to provide access to the environment, the skills, the materials, and the advanced technology to allow anyone, anywhere, to make (almost) anything.

Due to its success, Council staff are in the process of exploring ways we can expand select programs to more isolated areas of our LGA. However, insufficient funding models for such programs are a barrier to their implementation and expansion.

4. Effective volunteering through the arts, community programs and environmental sustainability

Volunteering is one of the most effective and dynamic ways to reduce rates of loneliness and social isolation.^{5 6 7}

Lake Macquarie City Council hosts volunteers across a wide range of our arts, sustainability, and community initiatives. In our most recent Volunteer Survey from 2023, we received positive feedback⁸ from volunteers who identified the Sustainable Neighbourhoods Programs, community events such as the Living Smart Festival and engagement with our galleries through tours, significantly increased feelings of connectedness amongst volunteers. However, like other coordinated volunteering efforts across the state, Lake Macquarie City Council faces the same challenges as the nature and trends associated with volunteering change across the country.

Similarly to other Asset Based Community Development examples shared in this submission, Council staff welcome the consideration of an injection of additional core funding to the local government sector to address these challenges.

5. Collaborating with the community sector: Interagency meetings

The Lake Macquarie Community Sector interagency meetings offer consistent reminders that, like the local government sector, community services are having to do more with less.

Common topics at these meetings include a lack of adequate resources to meet community need and the challenges associated with navigation of support services. Concerns have

⁵ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/mental-health/topic-areas/social-isolation-and-loneliness>

⁶ Williams, T., Lakhani, A. & Spelten, E. (2024). Exploring the relationship between loneliness and volunteering amongst Australian adults: a cross-sectional study. BMC Public Health, 24. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-17807-4>

⁷ Yiran, L., Yixuan, I. & Bingqin, L. (2022) Sustaining Old Age Volunteerism among CALD Population — the CASS Community Volunteer Model, Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney. https://7jzc46.p3cdn1.secureserver.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/CASS-Report-_last-day-before-launch-water-marked.pdf

⁸ <https://www.lakemac.com.au/For-residents/Community/Volunteer-with-us>

been raised about the potential reduction in funding by the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) once the Targeted Early Intervention reforms are implemented in 2025.

Council staff acknowledge this is not new information for other levels of government^{9 10 11} however want to emphasise the local government sector needs more than just an opportunity to provide submissions or write letters on public health issues and instead be invited on a regular basis to the decision-making table to share our local knowledge and awareness of trends and opportunities.

6. Promoting diverse, sustainable, and healthy communities: Living Smart Festival.

Lake Macquarie's annual Living Smart Festival is one of Australia's largest community sustainability events, designed to embrace everyday sustainability practices, multiculturalism and community connectedness. It promotes our city's third spaces, celebrates local multicultural diversity, and increases connectedness to our environment.

The event is free and attracts more than 20,000 people creating a ripple effect of positive momentum. This year, we allocated additional resources to the multicultural element of the festival and received overwhelmingly positive feedback from community.

7. Ageing Well: Programs and events for the senior's population of Lake Macquarie.

The Lake Macquarie Over 55s Program focuses on health, safety, wellbeing, and social connection. It delivers information sessions and activities at various locations across the city. With an overall aim to improve social connection and encourage healthy and active lifestyles, evaluation survey from these programs demonstrate that participants report significant improvements to wellbeing among their group participants. The facilitation of senior's programs is a common occurrence for councils that are resourced to do so.

To end this submission, we would like to share two short, good news stories about the value of local government in addressing public health concerns.

Recently, a woman who lived alone, had limited connections and family, participated in a series of 'music and morning tea to celebrate' sessions and appeared to have limited self-confidence when communicating with other members of the group. By the end of the group series the woman reflected by sharing she no longer needed the support of her carer to attend the group due to regaining her self-confidence and capacity.

⁹ https://www.ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/NCOSS_CostOfLiving22_FINAL_DESIGNED.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2024/community-services>

¹¹ <https://www.acoss.org.au/helping-people-in-need-during-a-cost-of-living-crisis-findings-from-the-australian-community-sector-survey/>

Another similar example involved a man who attended a bocce program series with his wife. Throughout the program he transitioned from sitting in the corner and only speaking with his wife to by the end of the program, engaging with others, smiling, laughing, and thanking program organisers for the opportunity to improve his sense of well-being.

Conclusion

Council staff are passionate about the role we play in addressing the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in NSW. With adequate resourcing, local government is positioned to identify and measure trends and implement preventative health measures that directly address loneliness in our communities. However, we cannot solve these important issues alone. This is a topic far greater than one level of government and requires a multi-faceted approach to address.