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

Organisation: Humans:Connecting

Date Received: 1 November 2024

HUMANS:CONNECTING

Submission to the
New South Wales Legislative Council's
Standing Committee on Social Issues'

Inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales

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Phil McAuliffe
Founder
HUMANS:CONNECTING

Hon Dr Sarah Kaine MLC
Chair
Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues
New South Wales Parliament House
6 Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Thursday 24 October 2024

Dear Chair

Thank you for conducting your inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales. We note the broad and expansive terms of reference and hope that bold insights and recommendations arise from the Standing Committee's inquiry.

My team and I have created HUMANS:CONNECTING, a social enterprise whose mission is to destigmatise loneliness and help people use their loneliness to get the connection that they need and deserve.

I have been working on loneliness and human connection since 2018 when I created The Lonely Diplomat (addressing loneliness for diplomats and their families) and The Loneliness Guy (addressing loneliness experienced by gay and queer men) in January 2020.

I created the sites because the resources available to me to address the loneliness I experienced were inadequate. We now provide the support, advice and services I wish I had when I first realised that the thoughts and feelings I was experiencing were loneliness.

Our work and innovative approach to loneliness have featured in prominent media outlets like Science, the BBC World Service, ABC *PM*, SBS *Insight* and other Australian and international media outlets. I have spoken about loneliness and social disconnection to audiences globally.

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HUMANS:CONNECTING urges the Standing Committee – indeed the New South Wales Government – to be bold and courageous. Seek input and advice from traditional sources like prominent mental health providers AND community groups. Be bold – and be seen to be bold – in your recommendations.

Our combined efforts are needed because the size and scope of the responding to the challenge of addressing loneliness and social disconnection in New South Wales is immense and pervasive.

We are pleased to provide the following submission for the Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues' consideration.

I remain available to answer any questions or provide further statements to the Standing Committee should it request.

Yours sincerely

Phil McAuliffe
Founder – HUMANS:CONNECTING

Part of the lonely diplomat

www.humansconnecting.org
www.thelonelydiplomat.com
www.thelonelinessguy.com

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1. Defining loneliness and social isolation

1.1   HUMANS:CONNECTING uses the [Australian Institute of Family Studies](#)' definition of loneliness, as 'a person's subjective feeling about, or perception of, the quality of their social connections. Usually, a negative feeling of being unsatisfied with their social relationships and connections. Loneliness is often a catch-all term for how people feel when there is a gap between their actual and desired levels of social relationships and connection.'

1.2   Beyond this definition, HUMANS:CONNECTING feels that the terms '*feeling lonely*' or '*are lonely*' can be interpreted in a pejorative way, leading the human to seen as lonely in a permanent or semi-permanent sense (i.e.: once lonely, always lonely). As noted in the terms of reference, loneliness is meant to be a transitory state, so we refer to the complex thoughts and feelings of loneliness as a 'loneliness experience' to reflect this.

1.3   Loneliness is an experience that can be difficult to describe and articulate. From our own lived experiences and from those whom we support, common words used to describe the thoughts and feelings of a loneliness experience are 'hollow', 'empty', 'nothingness', 'lack of purpose', 'a spectator in my own life', 'no one knows me', 'unseen', 'unheard' and 'I don't feel that I belong.'

1.4   Our approach is from the perspective that **loneliness is not a mental health issue**. Loneliness is a *social health* issue. Responding to loneliness as a mental health issue can provide a useful frame of reference from which to mount a public policy response, however only seeing it through that perspective can unintentionally feed the stigma of loneliness.

   1.4.1   Loneliness does not require a clinical diagnosis. If you feel lonely, you are experiencing loneliness.

   1.4.2   We know that loneliness, left untended, puts humans at significantly higher risk of developing anxiety and depression.

   1.4.3   Loneliness, left untended, puts humans at significantly higher risk of developing heart disease, diabetes and some forms of cancer.

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1.4.4   Loneliness is a social health issue but left untended and unacknowledged develops into mental and physical health issues.

1.5   We also use the Australian Institute of Family Studies' definition of *social isolation*, meaning 'an objective, measurable lack of contact with social connections, usually when a person experiences a low number of social interactions.'

2.   About HUMANS:CONNECTING

2.1   HUMANS:CONNECTING is a social enterprise providing online services to support humans experiencing loneliness to move through loneliness and take steps to get the connection we each need and deserve.

2.2   We do this by:

2.2.1   talking widely in the media about loneliness within humans, in our communities and in our workplaces;

- our work and lived experience have featured in Science Magazine, ABC Radio National, SBS Radio and SBS Television, ABC digital and the BBC World Service. See www.humansconnecting.org/media.

2.2.2   offering products that are easily accessible, convenient and provide high value support to people experiencing loneliness and social isolation;

2.2.3   providing services to workplaces and conferences that engage with loneliness and social isolation to address their impacts in our workplaces and throughout our communities;

2.2.4   measuring our impact through measuring perceived loneliness at the beginning and end of our Connection Starter Course (using the UCLA Loneliness Scale – Version 3);

2.2.5   collaborating with governments, academics, mental health professionals and mental health support providers; and

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2.2.6   seeing each human as a unique individual, for while there are similarities, the
thoughts and feelings of a loneliness experience are unique to each of us.

2.3   HUMANS:CONNECTING's products and services provide upstream support,
empowering people to recognise the first thoughts and feelings of their loneliness and take
corrective steps to get the connection their loneliness is telling them that they are missing.

2.3.1   The intention is for people to become loneliness literate and take steps to address
their thoughts and feelings before needing to engage in downstream services in
the mental health sector and/or crisis support services.

2.4   Our approach is rooted in ensuring that the three pillars of connection are strong within us
all. These connection pillars are: connection to self, connection to those most important to
you and connection to community. Each of these pillars must be as strong as the others
for us to feel fully connected.

2.4.1   We find that the oft-provided advice to 'put yourself out there' to someone
experiencing loneliness if unhelpful. The emphasis is on the *out there*, rather than
put your *self* out there. If we are not putting our authentic selves into the world, the
connection we receive back from those around us and our communities is not the
connection we need, and our loneliness experience will return and could persist.

2.4.2   It takes great courage to put our authentic selves into the world, and our products
and services are focused on helping people learn from their loneliness and then
put themselves into the world.

2.5   HUMANS:CONNECTING empowers humans experiencing loneliness to listen to their
loneliness whenever they experience it and use the skills they have learned and the tools
they have developed to quickly get the connection that they have been missing.

2.5.1   We empower humans to speak of their loneliness and to hear stories of other
people's loneliness and respond with empathy, and without pity, judgement or
leaping to fix it. This sense of self-agency is important.

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2.6   HUMANS:CONNECTING initiates and leads conversations about loneliness in the public sphere in a way that reaches humans where we each experience loneliness: within our hearts, minds and souls.

    2.6.1   While loneliness is an uncomfortable experience, HUMANS:CONNECTING frames loneliness in the context of social health and wellbeing, as opposed to mental health and wellbeing. Social health relates to the overall sense of wellbeing we experience when our connections and relationships are strong. We advocate for positive social health.

3. How HUMANS:CONNECTING mitigates and reduces loneliness and social isolation

3.1   HUMANS:CONNECTING empowers humans to recognise loneliness, own it, admit it and then use what our loneliness is telling us about the connection we're not feeling to then get that connection. Our work helps people get out of the house AND their heads.

3.2   It is critical understand that loneliness is an emotion, not a sign of mental illness. Pathologising loneliness disempowers us when we experience it, and the support provided only refers to seeking crisis support or engaging the services of a mental health provider.

3.3   HUMANS:CONNECTING destigmatises loneliness and helps people got the connection that they need and deserve. Our work offers a range of products and services designed to help people take steps through loneliness towards positive social health.

    3.3.1   Our products are designed for individual humans and to meet them where they are. Our audience is aware of their loneliness, and they want to strengthen their social health and connections. We provide a **podcast** and a **blog** that openly discuss loneliness (critical to destigmatising it) and provide useful practical advice for the reader/listener/viewer to step through loneliness and to take steps towards feeling connected.

    3.3.2   We offer the **Connection Starter Course** – a self-directed course – helping people to sit with their loneliness, learn from it and then listen to it to get the connection they have been missing.

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3.3.3   Our <u>services</u> revolve around making a positive social impact. This includes speaking events, speaking in the media and developing submissions to government enquiries into loneliness and social isolation. **Creating Connected Workplaces** is our flagship service, which we offer in collaboration with Annecy Behavioral Science Lab (ABSL) in France. ABSL provide world-leading scientific research into loneliness and human connection and work with the European Commission, NASA and the Global Initiative for Loneliness and Connection.

3.3.4   **Creating Connected Workplaces** addresses loneliness in workplaces. We know that humans who feel lonely at work report higher levels of absenteeism. They are less productive, less efficient, and are more likely to leave. If they stay, they are less productive and less efficient.

3.4   Our products and services have been designed to meet people where they are: both physically and emotionally. It is an upstream service, and our products and services are designed to fill the gap between seeking support for loneliness from a crisis support service and seeking support from a mental health professional.

3.5   We engage people where they are: searching for support on their devices at a time when they may not feel that they have the words to articulate their loneliness experience to people around them. We provide no-nonsense support that empowers people to own their loneliness and take a step towards feeling connected again.

3.6   We provide the service that our founder – Phil McAuliffe – wished was available when he first realised he was experiencing loneliness.

3.7   Our services are delivered through our website (www.humansconnecting.org), podcast services, YouTube, online and in-person globally from our base in Canberra.

4.   The extent of loneliness and social isolation in New South Wales

4.1   Loneliness – like joy and sadness – is part of the human condition. All humans experience it at times throughout their lives. As such, 100 per cent of people in New South Wales will experience loneliness during their lives.

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4.2   HUMANS:CONNECTING defers to the measurement of loneliness and social isolation
data provided by [Ending Loneliness Together](#) and [Friends For Good](#). The [State of the
Nation: Social Connection in Australia 2023](#) report published by Ending Loneliness
Together shows that:

4.2.1   an average of almost 1 in 3 Australians feel lonely;

4.2.2   1 in 6 Australians are experiencing severe loneliness;

4.2.3   29 per cent people in New South Wales feel lonely;

4.2.4   men and women (so reported) are equally lonely;

4.2.5   40 per cent of people living alone and 30 per cent of people living with others feel
lonely;

4.2.6   27 per cent of people whose financial needs are being met are reporting feeling
lonely, compared to 51 per cent of people whose financial needs are not being
met. Those whose financial needs are not being met are 2.8 times more likely to
be experiencing loneliness.

4.2.7   young people (aged 18-24) and those in middle age (aged 45-54) report the
highest rates of loneliness (38 per cent and 36 per cent respectively). People aged
75+ report the lowest rates of loneliness in the community (13 per cent).

5.   Populations most at risk of loneliness and social isolation

5.1   We understand that the Standing Committee will see data and analysis of populations
most at risk in other submissions. HUMANS:CONNECTING defers to their expertise.

5.2   In reviewing the written submissions and hearings, we invite the Standing Committee to
remember that loneliness is part of the human experience and all humans experience
loneliness at times in their life. **All humans in New South Wales are at risk of
loneliness.**

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5.3   Age, gender, income, address, job title, educational qualification or relationship status offer no exemptions.

5.4   We wish to highlight a concept that see frequently: **'competitive and comparative loneliness'**.

5.4.1   Competitive and comparative loneliness looks and sounds like '*x* population is experiencing loneliness more than others'; the implication being that it is more deserving of the money provided and support available.

5.4.2   In a resource-constrained environment and with the size and scale of loneliness and social isolation so large, conversations necessarily focus on data. Conversations that focus on data focus on the largest numbers. By their nature, these conversations exclude those outside of the largest numbers.

5.4.3   This creates an environment in which stakeholders compete over where the resources will be allocated for the greatest good.

6.   Psychological and physiological impacts of loneliness

6.1   We understand that the Standing Committee will see data and analysis the psychological and physiological impacts of loneliness in other submissions. HUMANS:CONNECTING defers to their expertise.

6.2   HUMANS:CONNECTING offers insight about the loneliness and social disconnection from lived experience.

6.3   At its core, loneliness can make us question our worthiness for love and belonging. Loneliness can make us feel broken, unseen, and unheard. This is a painful state, and the thoughts and feelings of loneliness can become a key component of our daily life.

6.4   Loneliness can make us feel that we do not belong. We will not feel that we belong if we do not feel seen or heard.

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6.4.1   Cultivating a sense of belonging – of feeling seen and feeling heard – is an important way to cultivate feelings of connection. This is often a useful strategy for supporting someone – and ourselves – through a loneliness experience.

6.5   Loneliness puts humans into a state of fight or flight. While on one level we crave meaningful connection, loneliness can make us perceive innocent social interactions as threats to our safety and wellbeing. This can breed feelings of mistrust, suspicion and fear of that which we do not understand (source).

6.6   **Loneliness weakens social cohesion**. There is growing public discourse about the link between loneliness, forlornness and political and social extremism. Our need to feel seen and heard and to feel that we belong to something greater than ourselves can attract us to join social groups – from community organisations to extremist groups.[1]

6.6.1   The role loneliness plays in growing political and social extremism can be hidden within discussion of other factors. The e-brief entitled, 'Radicalisation and Violent Extremism: Causes and Responses' prepared by Chris Angus of the New South Wales Parliamentary Service in 2016 for the New South Wales Parliament does not mention loneliness at all. However, it notes that social exclusion and 'lack of belonging' are factors that can lead to radicalisation and violent extremism. However, despite its prevalence, 'loneliness' is an unstated reason throughout the factors listed as to why someone who feels marginalised could be radicalised (source).

6.6.2   HUMANS:CONNECTING hopes that this exclusion would not appear in a similar report prepared today with what we are learning about loneliness and social disconnection.

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[1] Variety of sources, including
- Johanna Weiss, 'A Truer Reality Beyond Reality: Hannah Arendt's Warning About How Totalitarianism Takes Root', Politico, 19 May 2024, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/05/19/mag-weiss-samantharosehill-q-a-00158439, accessed 15 October 2024.
- Helen Whittle, 'Is loneliness a threat to Germany's democracy?' Deutsche Welle, 17 March 2024, https://www.dw.com/en/is-loneliness-a-threat-to-germanys-democracy/a-68513591, accessed 15 October 2024.
- Nabeelah Jaffer, 'In extremis', Aeon, 19 July 2018, https://aeon.co/essays/loneliness-is-the-common-ground-of-terror-and-extremism, accessed 15 October 2024.

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6.7   HUMANS:CONNECTING contends that the pain of loneliness leads humans to search for belonging in ways that run counter to our own wellbeing and the wellbeing of those around us. People who feel like they belong in the community do not want to harm it.

7.   Social (dis)connection and physical health

7.1   We understand that the Standing Committee will see discussion, data and analysis of the evidence linking social (dis)connection to physical health in other submissions. HUMANS:CONNECTING defers to their expertise.

8.   How transient loneliness develops into chronic loneliness

8.1   It is important that loneliness is a temporary experience, however it is such an uncomfortable state that it is often denied, ignored or otherwise wished away. This understandable avoidance can be how loneliness turns into chronic or severe loneliness. Here, we offer our perspective from lived experience and what we see in those we've supported since 2018.

8.2   **There is a stigma to loneliness**. In our view, the stigma stems in part from an underlying belief that we are broken and unworthy of love and belonging when we experience loneliness. Because we do not speak about loneliness and do not share our experience of it, we feel that no one else thinks the thoughts and feels the feelings that we have.

8.3   **The lack of language about loneliness** also feeds the stigma. Our collective inability to speak of our loneliness means that we do not know how to talk about – or listen to – our loneliness or the loneliness experience of others. Not being able to talk about it compounds the issue. Besides, how can we talk about it or ask for support when we cannot describe what it is that we are experiencing? Consequently, we cannot 'come out' as a human experiencing the emotion of loneliness when we experience it.

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8.3.1 *Coming out* is a useful metaphor to help talk about how difficult it is to accept our own loneliness and then admit it aloud. The fear of being perceived as broken, sad, clingy and unworthy of love and belonging. That perception marks us as different. Accepting and admitting loneliness then allows us to take important first steps to feeling connected again. Indeed, talking about loneliness through general discussions and hearing individual stories is the way to break down the stigma that keeps loneliness a taboo topic.

8.3.2 Moreover, we often do not know how to sit with the stories of loneliness others share with us. It can be uncomfortable, and we want to fix someone's loneliness for them to ease their pain and our own discomfort.

As a gay CIS-gendered man, HUMANS:CONNECTING's founder, Phil McAuliffe, often speaks about his experience and observations about coming out as gay and coming out as lonely. People often respond better to him coming out as gay than coming out as lonely. We know what to say when someone comes out of the closet and how to be supportive. Phil's observed that coming out as gay does not challenge someone else's relationship to their own sexuality.

However, coming out as experiencing loneliness challenges the recipients of that news to sit with the thought – even if for a moment – that the quality and quantity of their connections is not what they want or need. Coming out as lonely can make others confront the possibility – even likelihood – that they are also experiencing loneliness. We fear that loneliness is contagious. It makes us deeply uncomfortable.

8.3.3 In our experience, how could we ask for help from someone when we could not describe what we were experiencing?

8.4 **Busyness**. Connection requires us to invest time: time to maintain relationships and time to invest in making new relationships. We can feel time poor, with obligations and responsibilities at home and at work taking much of our days. Beyond the notion that there is always something to do, we note that busyness is often a reason to avoid sitting with the discomfort of loneliness.

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8.5   We humans create busyness and use it as an excuse to avoid thoughts and feelings. Indeed, busyness – as seen through hustle culture – is often celebrated in society. We can derive our sense of worth from how busy and important we are. This makes pausing and resting – and connecting – seem a waste of precious time when we could be otherwise productive.

8.5.1   In this way, busyness performs a similar role to the infinite ways that we humans use to avoid uncomfortable thoughts and feelings.

8.5.2   **Busyness is the main reason we see at** HUMANS:CONNECTING **for people not recognising the signs of the loneliness or allowing themselves the space and time to take action to reconnect to themselves, to those most important to them and their communities. Indeed, busyness is the excuse we most often use ourselves to avoid sitting in discomfort.**

8.5.3   We invite the members of the Standing Committee and its secretariat to pause for a moment and reflect if they are using the busyness of their roles to avoid the loneliness (or any other uncomfortable emotion) that comes with occupying public office. Do your reflections make you comfortable?

9.   Reducing the financial burden of loneliness

9.1   We understand that the Standing Committee will receive analysis of the financial costs of loneliness to the New South Wales budget and the state's economy in other submissions. HUMANS:CONNECTING defers to their expertise.

10.   Developments and initiatives in other jurisdictions

10.1   We believe that the Standing Committee will be already aware of similar parliamentary inquiries that have been held in **Queensland** and the **Australian Capital Territory**.

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10.2 We also understand that the Standing Committee will already have been made aware of the declaration of loneliness and social isolation as a public health emergency by the Surgeon-General of the **United States**, Dr Vivek Murthy, in 2023.

10.3 Furthermore, we understand that the Standing Committee will have already received advice from other submissions that mention the creation of Ministers for Loneliness in the **United Kingdom** and **Japan** and work being done in the **European Union** to address loneliness and social disconnection.

10.4 Finally, we understand that the Standing Committee will already possess information about the **World Health Organization**'s creation of a Commission on Social Connection.

10.5 Australian organisations – including social enterprises like HUMANS:CONNECTING – play a leading role in raising awareness of the impacts of loneliness and help people take steps to prioritise their connection needs. There is globally recognised expertise available to the New South Wales Government in framing its response.

> RECOMMENDATION 1 - HUMANS:CONNECTING urges the New South Wales Government to be bold and to play a leading role in how loneliness and social isolation is addressed by governments not just within Australia, but globally.

11.   Reducing the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in the community

11.1 Knowing that human connection is already known as the antidote to human loneliness, HUMANS:CONNECTING makes the following suggestions.

11.2 **Work to destigmatise loneliness**. Conversations about loneliness and social isolation must be normalised. While there are common characteristics of loneliness, the loneliness experienced by an individual is unique to them. Opening safe ways to sit with the concept of loneliness can empower people to look at how and why they feel lonely so they can have agency over their response.

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11.2.1   For something that every human experiences from time to time, loneliness is often
          talked about in a dry, conceptual way. Talking about loneliness in statistical terms
          and how it affects our physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing does not
          resonate. Humans do not easily relate to statistics; we relate to stories. Loneliness
          is destigmatised by moving from talking about it in the third person ('Loneliness
          is…') and second person ('You're not alone') into the first person ('I experienced
          loneliness when…').

          •   Stories of loneliness and social connection need to be shared and amplified:
               they inspire, they empower, and they encourage people to take steps
               towards connection.

11.2.2   Loneliness is an emotion that all humans experience. Loneliness is often spoken
          about with issues like as suicide, depression and anxiety. **Starting the
          conversation at the point where loneliness – an emotion that all humans
          experience – is equated to poor mental health can inadvertently feed the
          stigma.**

11.2.3   Reframing loneliness as a social health issue empowers each of us to recognise
          the signs of loneliness within ourselves and then take steps to improve our social
          health and wellbeing. Equating loneliness with mental health can inadvertently
          feed the stigma and is disempowering.

11.2.4   A crude parallel can be drawn to equate loneliness with conversations about
          mental health with conversations about hunger needing intervention for disordered
          eating. Such interventions will be necessary in some cases, but not in every
          instance.

RECOMMENDATION 2 -   Support efforts to reframe meaningful human connection as a social
health issue which empowers all humans in New South Wales to invest in their social health and
wellbeing.

11.3   **Cultivate belonging to create a connected community**. It is always helpful to remember
        that we know that human connection is the antidote to human loneliness.

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HUMANS:CONNECTING's approach is built around this knowledge. If the goal is to reduce the burden of loneliness – be that burden financial or otherwise – the answer is to support people to get the connection that they need and deserve.

11.4   Cultivating feelings of belonging address feelings of loneliness. A consistent challenge in our work at HUMANS:CONNECTING is that humans find their loneliness abhorrent and an issue to avoid. Engaging with other people's loneliness or the concept of loneliness is acceptable, but not our own. **We are more likely to engage on cultivating our sense of belonging rather than why we feel lonely.**

11.5   Humans feel connected when we feel that we belong. A first step is to demonstrably and overtly put connection at the heart of government decisions and government decision making.

11.5.1   Regulatory Impact Statements, Environmental Impact Statements, Community Impact Statements and Small Business Impact Statements and the like are routinely part of government decision making. HUMANS:CONNECTING advocates for the New South Wales Government to include the concept of belonging within these considerations.

RECOMMENDATION 3 -   The New South Wales Government includes the concept of *belonging* and improving the social health of people within Government considerations – particularly in budget, policy design and planning decisions.

Templates for Cabinet and Ministerial submissions used by the New South Wales Public Service to be amended to answer the question: *how will this proposal positively impact the social health of the people affected by this decision?* This is an opportunity for the New South Wales Government to integrate improved social connectedness into all areas of public policy development and implementation.

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11.6 HUMANS:CONNECTING notes that almost 30 per cent of people in New South Wales (per Ending Loneliness Together's statistics) do not feel seen and do not feel heard in some way. Helping people throughout New South Wales feel that they truly belong – not just as a platitude – is the key to creating a community where people feel connected to themselves, to those most important to them and to their community.

11.6.1 As previously seen, this can have the positive consequence of reducing instances of political and social radicalisation.

11.7 **If you build it, they may not come**. When we are in the depths of a loneliness experience, the struggle can be more to get out of our own heads rather than to get out of the house. This is one of the reasons why not everyone is going to feel comfortable attending an in-person event to socialise as a first step to moving past their loneliness. A variety of engagement methods – including online, in house and in community – are needed.

11.7.1 It takes bravery and courage to take steps to connect after a period of loneliness. We need to trust in ourselves and in others before we feel comfortable to connect. Building trust takes commitment, persistence and perseverance and, for some at least, trust may be in short supply.

> RECOMMENDATION 4 - The New South Wales Government – both the elected representatives and the bureaucracy – prioritises words and actions that build trust between government and the people of New South Wales.

11.8 **Provide opportunities for people to connect affordably**. People experiencing financial hardship are seven times more likely to experience persistent loneliness (source – Ending Loneliness Together, p. 24). Financial distress compounds social isolation, as people opt out of opportunities to socialise to economise. High rents and large mortgage repayments can mean that people can initially jettison their social spending as a first response to saving money, only to find that they are consequently experiencing loneliness and social isolation.

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11.8.1   While connection does not need to cost anything, it can be socially challenging for people to admit that they cannot afford to eat out or frequent bars, cafés or go to the movies to spend time with their family and friends. Additionally, the cost of transport to get to social events (petrol, tolls, public transport and rideshare services) can put social events outside the home financially out of reach, compounding feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

11.8.2   The challenge of connecting is further compounded when there may be few third spaces available and accessible for people to connect in their communities.

> **RECOMMENDATION 5 -**   Cap, reduce and/or remove financial barriers for people to connect using public transport – including into towns and regional centres outside the metropolitan areas.
>
> Support and amplify campaigns encouraging people to connect using options that cost little to no money.

11.9   **Review funding models and priorities**. As loneliness and social isolation are frequently seen as mental health issues, funding to address loneliness has traditionally been given to mental health bodies and crisis support services. This is understandable, as these services are well-known and can respond on a national scale and have a history of managing events and awareness campaigns. However, the risk is that funding mental health bodies and crisis support services can inadvertently perpetuate the stigma around the loneliness experience.

11.9.1   Loneliness and social isolation are social health issues. They are not mental health and physical health issues unless they are left untended and unaddressed. From our own lived experience, it is confronting to sit with loneliness and feel that the only way to get support and advice is to call a crisis support service or wait to see a mental health service. It does not need to be this way.

11.10   On the other end of the funding spectrum, addressing loneliness and social isolation is given small amounts of money and then relies on the goodwill and energy of volunteers to deliver services. Not-for-profit entities are created with the best of intentions but can fold

HUMANS:CONNECTING

Submission to the Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues'
Inquiry into prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales.

November 2024

due in part to volunteers not being available, sources of funding drying up and/or the reporting requirements under legislation being too onerous and complex for small start-ups to sustain.

11.11 HUMANS:CONNECTING is part of a growing third way: a social impact enterprise. We invest the majority of our profits back into increasing and measuring our social impact on the issue of loneliness and human connection. We seek to be self-sufficient, generating our own financial capital through our products and services and invest our profits into growing our impact. But this takes time and getting seed funding as a very lean start-up is challenging. We persist in seeking sources of funding to increase our impact, knowing that funding will supercharge our efforts and help our insights through lived experience be part of discussions among academics and public policy developers shaping collective responses to loneliness and social isolation.

RECOMMENDATION 6 - Fund large AND small organisations – including social enterprises – addressing loneliness and social isolation in New South Wales.