

**Submission
No 107**

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

Organisation: Bathurst Neighbourhood Centre

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The Bathurst Neighbourhood Centre (TNC) has been operating since 1976, supporting the Bathurst community and beyond in regional NSW. TNC facilitates people to come together to strengthen, participate, develop and celebrate our community.

Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCCs) in NSW play a key role in communities by reducing social isolation through volunteering, offering social activities and spaces for community groups to meet. NCCs use local knowledge to connect community members with partner organisations and offer support to vulnerable groups during crisis and natural disasters.

'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 occur at the same time for an individual, they refer to different aspects of an individual's social relationships' (Ending Loneliness Together 2020, p.11).

Being located in a regional area there are vulnerable groups including young people who can feel isolated due to lack of transport which leads to difficulty in finding employment. Seniors, people losing their confidence and lower self-esteem as their families move away from the area and their social groups diminish. CALD communities adjusting to their new environment, facing language barriers, housing crisis issues, lack of employment opportunities. Domestic and Family Violence (FDV) victims and their children. All of the aforementioned increases peoples' feelings of social isolation and loneliness.

We are seeing an increase in FDV survivors seeking help, service referrals and social connectedness at our Centre. Through many one-on-one conversations that slowly build trust between survivors and our staff, we have identified women felt isolated and unable to speak about or seek support for their recent trauma. Several women have said had they not had an initial connection to the Centre through one of our programs such as English tuition or Mums n Bubs/Toddlers they would not have known where to turn during their trauma. Particularly CALD women who have a lack of knowledge of local information and geography, we have built a strong partnership with a dedicated Multicultural DV specialist from a local organisation Plus Community which has also strengthened our relationship with organisations such as Link to Home and Wattle Tree House.

Through our D CAF (Dementia café) a group where carers and their loved one who is suffering memory loss, can relax, socialize and discover ways to live well with Demetia. Our Centre has provided a space to reduce isolation and increase social connections for both carer and loved ones. It is not a respite service, it is not a replacement care arrangement, it is a low-key social activity providing a safe environment in a normal setting surrounded by the usual activities conducted in any centre, which is key. The group is not isolated or tucked away, they are engaged in a functional setting where other activities carry on around them. Physical activity such as chair exercises are carried out and the rest of the session involves socialisation including card games, quizzes and general interactions with everyone mingling comfortably at their own pace and needs.

NCCs have an enormous role to play to reduce the impact of loneliness at the individual and community level. The Neighbourhood Centre at Bathurst runs many social activities that reduce loneliness in our community, including; Learner Driver Program, English Tuition, Homework Club, Mums Bubs and Toddlers Playgroup, Technology Tutoring, Literacy

Program, School Holiday Programs, Migrant Support and Connecting Seniors. A Tai Chi group, one participant said joining the Tai Chi group was her first foray into socialising since losing her husband of 56 years. Keeping in mind these programs would not be possible without our dedicated team of volunteers, they are invaluable to our community, especially those experiencing social isolation and loneliness. We support volunteers within our organisation and play a vital role in the community referring volunteers to other local community organisations.

We partner with Veritas House (Homeless Youth) Organisation through our Mob Motoring learner driver program focusing on First Nation and disadvantaged youth assisting them obtaining their P's drivers licence.

Further, the Bathurst Neighbourhood Centre hires rooms to many local groups, eg. Needlecrafters providing a space for people to work on their projects and socialise on a weekly basis. Bookclubs, space for neurodiverse children to play and craft, other community groups hire the rooms for cultural meetings and other community events.

Volunteering plays a major role in reducing social isolation here in Bathurst, we have a team of volunteers who are in front desk, admin roles, tutoring, driving instructors, gardeners, this creates valuable social connections, and supports our organisation exponentially.

If NSW Government invested further into our NCC, we would be able to hire a community development worker, run regular social activities for teens. Host monthly lunches for newly arrived migrant families. Coordinate visits between elderly people in the community. Our role as a social connector would only grow.

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 NCCs in NSW.

As loneliness and social isolation increases in society in post pandemic, through the current cost of living crisis, acute housing crisis and rise of mental health struggles, NCCs are the most ideal social infrastructure to be leveraged to reduce social isolation and loneliness in NSW communities. NCCs welcome everyone, regardless of race, gender, sexuality, religion, age or social status and by their very nature build connections between individuals and organisations, particularly those who are isolated, vulnerable and disenfranchised.

Despite the enormous impact NCCs have in reducing isolation in NSW, they currently receive no core funding from the NSW Government- one of the last states in Australia where this is the case. They are reliant on program funding which is often short term and inflexible. Also very time consuming to apply for very small amounts of money which in turn is restrictive to what can be delivered.

Core funding means that all NCCs can respond to social isolation and loneliness however it manifests in their communities, which we know is not uniform. Token solutions to loneliness and social isolation by "cookie cutting" more social groups across the state will not address the epidemic. Local communities need to be empowered, through local NCCs to unite and solve social issues together from the ground up.

In 2022, the Queensland Government delivered core funding to all NCCs 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 NCCs play in reducing social isolation and loneliness. This funding model allows NCCs the flexibility and longevity required to keep the doors open and respond nimbly to community needs.

National Neighbourhood Centres Week's motto in 2024 was "Stronger Together" NCCs are the beating heart of local communities. Our Bathurst Centre partnered with the local Boys to

Bush (local community organisation supporting disadvantaged boy youth) and First Nation artists to produce a beautiful artwork inside our welcome room, bringing us altogether. It was “Stronger Together” in action!

Any strategy to address loneliness and social isolation in the future should ensure that these local, welcoming place-based organisations are at front and centre, creating vital connection, healthy relationships and belonging for all in NSW. Our centre supports LCSA’s recommendations to this inquiry that position NCCs as key social infrastructure to address social isolation and loneliness.