

Submission
No 113

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

Organisation: Drummoyne Community Centre Inc

Date Received: 1 November 2024



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

Response from Drummoyne Community Centre Inc, 10 Cometrowe Street, Drummoyne 2047

1 November, 2024

Drummoyne Community Centre (DCC), located in the local government area of the City of Canada Bay (CCBC) in the inner west of Sydney, opened in response to a community need for connection and a place where people could gather for social and community activities and events. This year we celebrated 45 years of continuous service to our LGA community by holding an Open Day to showcase community groups that rely on the Centre to provide their programs and services. We deliver service to a wide range of age groups, offering programs, activities and services that have a strong focus on health and wellbeing – physical and psychological – and include transport services, parenting programs, technology classes, English classes, exercise classes, gardening groups, choirs and other interest and hobby groups to name a few.

Our governance structure includes an elected Management Committee from the membership, which currently comprises eight local volunteers from varied occupations including financial, legal, human resources, health, marketing and business, who give many hours of work to sub committees and working groups. We ensure a continuing relationships with Council through ex-officio positions on the committee, with quarterly minuted meetings and an annual AGM at which senior Council staff and councillors attend. Our Strategic Plan (2024-2030) has recently been released with a renewed set of values and was presented to our membership as part of the AGM process. This plan was developed by a Reference group following community stakeholder and member consultations and desktop research was undertaken by a student from Macquarie University during her placement. All of our work supports our vision for a safe inclusive community which enables all its residents to participate and share a vibrant cultural life.

As described by our members, and those we consulted, DCC is “a place of ‘belonging’”, a place where one can “build roots to community activities”, “an easy way to connect with people”. Over 300 survey responses were received from the consultations, and responses overwhelmingly reported programs delivered at the Centre were professional, provided connections and stability, and were inclusive.

This inquiry is exploring loneliness and social isolation in NSW and in the context of service delivery by DCC the last few years have shown us how valuable the Centre and its programs and

resources have been to the local community. Following the pandemic our volunteer base has grown, enrolments in programs have increased and community partnerships that developed have produced programs that are ongoing and growing.

One of the best descriptors of DCC was provided by a participant in one of our programs: *“a resource centre for when a person is lost and is at a loss where to turn to – a resource that provides information and that encourages self-help”*. Another – *“the glue that strings society and brings people together”*.

There were over 7700 attendances at activities in the past year. People feel connected to us and there is a lot of repeat business. Once they join our centre, they attend many courses or groups and they built not just skills or fitness, but also friendships with each other. They also enjoy the connection with staff and volunteers. This connection with people and place builds a level of trust and they tell us about their lives: their health concerns, their family disfunction, their loss of partners, their hopes and worries for the future, their loneliness and their isolation from others. They sometimes tell us things they don't even like admitting to themselves. Loneliness in particular carries a stigma.

As described in the literature it is important to distinguish the difference between social isolation and loneliness in particular where a service such as a Neighbourhood Community Centre (NCC) relies on grant funding to provide programs to meet community needs. Measuring social isolation is quantifiable whereby we can determine and measure a lack of interaction with family, friends or the wider community, whereas loneliness is more subjective and thus more difficult to quantify especially when trying to provide evidence for sponsorship and grant monies.

Centres like ours could be doing so much more, however due to lack of core funding most of our staff are part-time, and the challenge of maintaining administration processes and data management that meet compliance and grant funding requirements is real and sometimes overwhelming. Non-recurrent grant funding adds to the problem. Programs are developed with one off grants that can't often be maintained for long after the conclusion of funding, even with good intention and volunteer assistance. The reality is we need sustainable, recurrent solutions to make a real difference, and that means recurrent funding.

Loneliness and social isolation in the City of Canada Bay area

The City of Canada Bay Council (CCBC) released a Social Issues Paper in March 2021 that was undertaken to explore the social and community issues facing the local community and to determine improved support services and pathways to mitigate social isolation, discrimination, domestic violence, among other issues, that were exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic. Their internal forecasting at the time of the report estimated that by 2036 the LGA population will rise to 122,000 with a rise of 37%. Increased density and cultural diversity, particularly new migrant populations is particularly expected around the new metro precincts. A whole of community approach was undertaken to inform the Paper and included wide consultation with community groups, individuals, Council staff through workshops, surveys, focus groups and

interviews. 40% of respondents to surveys and focus groups reported declining social connection and increased isolation, with loneliness impacting on quality of life.

Key factors identified that were impacting on social issues included

- the lack of social cohesion highlighted in particular by the pandemic
- service providers are based in suburbs outside of the LGA thus reducing access to programs
- geography of the LGA straddling the Parramatta River limits ease of public transport access
- inadequate adolescent programs apart from sporting activities
- cultural discrimination during the pandemic increased isolation and loneliness

In preparation for our own Drummoyne Community Centre Strategic Plan (2024-2030) we also undertook multiple consultation processes across the LGA including surveys, feedback forms for individual services and programs, a SWOT analysis and workshops. Individual interviews were conducted with a wide range of community organisations.

The responses were positive in that they believed DCC was being responsive to community needs and were delivering a wide range of interesting and needed programs to the community.

Responses to what more DCC could be working on included:

- more for seniors as we are experiencing an ageing population
- assistance with accessing government services
- more social activities that may address the high level of loneliness in the community

When envisaging a world of adequate funding, the management committee, employees and community identified a desire to:

- increase our transport services to further reduce isolation
- increase our partnerships with community organisations to expand programs for vulnerable groups such as people who are lonely, adolescents, grandparent carers, families with newborns, and new residents
- increase our social support programs

When identifying our weaknesses, the following were highlighted:

- reliance of non-recurrent funding
- the limitation of employee hours
- the unavailability of modern equipment/ resources such as a database

Our approach at DCC to Loneliness and Isolation

Several of our programs have been successful in reaching out to those in need of social connection:

1. Our **Transport Service** operates every Wednesday and Thursday to support residents to get to core services in the community. It keeps them independent and active and allows them to reach people and activities they would not normally be able to get to. The service has seen an increase in use over the past few years and has supported thousands of passenger trips. Comments from users include the affordability compared to taxis, and the opportunities to get to know other local residents and how it helps to create social friendships. For many of these customers, the only trip away from home all week is the one on our Bayrider Mini-bus. The bus is also now used by a local nursing home and retirement village to enable community participation for their residents. 81% of users in 2023 were over the age of 80 years and there has been a 100% increase of men using the service in 2023. DCC also has a register of volunteer drivers who support this service using their own vehicles for overflow needs.
2. **Wonder & Wisdom Intergenerational Program** commenced in 2023 in partnership with Drummoyne Preschool. Public interest in intergenerational relationships, such as that shown on ABC's "Old People's Home for 4 Year Olds" and "Old People's Home for Teenagers" has grown over the years as awareness of the value of intergenerational dynamics has grown. Whether it was the increased confidence and empathy of 4-year olds, or the sense of connection and engagement of seniors, the ABC series documented benefits for all participants. Our program at DCC, facilitated by volunteers and supported by the early educators from the preschool, remains a popular one that addresses social isolation for both children and older people who have been disconnected by distance from extended family. Senior volunteers have reported a sense of purpose and delight in sharing their time and knowledge with young children again, and children their families and centre staff report the excitement of the children in visiting the seniors at the centre and having some dedicated time doing fun activities and talking together. That sense of belonging and positive bonding is what Drummoyne Community Centre is all about.
3. **Tea & Chat.** This program was established as an opportunity for people to meet new friends and connect with others in the centre and the community. It began as a drop-in activity with conversations over refreshments. It has now morphed into a program where guest speakers come and present on relevant and interesting topics, of importance to our community. We still have the structured time for chats amongst attendees and friendships have definitely formed. We have witnessed that it is less intimidating for people experiencing loneliness in our community to come to hear a guest speaker talk, rather than a drop-in program spelling-out "come if you are lonely!"
4. **Programs that bring people together around interest or hobbies.** Several of our DCC programs bring people together for social interaction. They develop knowledge, skills and interests that keep them healthy however there is an underlying intention it will also bring them social connection that adds to their quality of life. For example, we have a Mens Group that focuses on mutual support and current affairs, and a Music Appreciation program that brings joy and connection to others when sharing and listening to a wide range of music.
5. **DCC services to enhance engagement and support independence** include partnerships with organisations who assist people with skills development and advocacy. We work with: Metro Assist who provide an outreach worker who provides financial counselling and budgeting; the

ATO who provide support for people needing to lodge a tax return (often accessed by seniors who don't have family support); a local Solicitors Firm who provide pro-bono support for legal matters.

6. Our most recent program has just started (October 2024). It is called **Companions Connect: Building Better Health Brick by Brick** and was only made possible with a non-recurrent grant from Australia Post for \$10,000. This innovative monthly program is designed to foster meaningful conversations among participants, while stimulating creativity and engagement. Each facilitated session brings a new topic, allowing seniors to reflect, share personal stories, and connect with others in a fun, hands-on way. The program utilises Lego Serious Play as a tool to start conversations. It had proven successful in the USA and UK in increasing a sense of belonging and connection, reducing a sense of loneliness in participants. This program is unique to Australia according to our research.

It is important to reflect that many core activities at DCC are facilitated or managed by our volunteers, including the role of Volunteer Coordinator, which also focuses on recruitment, support and retainment. Volunteer roles are seen as two way where many report they provide opportunities to give back to community while reducing their own isolation and helping maintain a quality of life that is meaningful. Without their support, many of the programs listed above would not be viable.

The impacts of loneliness and social isolation

The impacts of loneliness and social isolation are far reaching and well known.

Numerous studies (KPMG & Groundswell Foundation, (2022); Fakoya, McCorry & Donnelly . (2020) and Badcock et al (2023)), have reported on the causes and negative outcomes of loneliness in our modern societies with poor health outcomes being a major impact. The health care burden predictably increases without social infrastructure as an ongoing intervention, resulting in increased pressure on our hospitals and mental health services with estimated costs at \$2.7billion per annum.

Evidence in the research is clear that facilitating community groups that are involved in purposeful activities is a successful way of reducing loneliness.

Research across Australia has shown the huge community value NCCs provide. Contributions to physical and psychological wellbeing for all generations, social connection and disaster response are core activities of these centres.

Drummoyne Community Centre supports the recommendation from our peak body, the LSCA, that positions Neighbourhood Centres as key social infrastructure to address social isolation and loneliness.

RECOMMENDATION

Neighbourhood Centre are ideally placed to address Loneliness and Social Isolation

NCCs are integral to the local structure within our LGAs. They should be seen as resource hubs, connectors and coordinating centres that facilitate community development projects and be vital

elements to frontline responses especially in times of emergencies or disasters. Without ongoing and realistic core funding it is extremely difficult to develop tools, skill sets and resources that can support communities to develop strong social connections, build resilience and thrive.

Drummoyne Community Centre supports the Local Community Services Association (LCSA) position and endorses the core funding model as shown below.

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

This will ensure community connectivity, stability, and flexibility, with an improved ability for community and neighbourhood centres to respond to local needs.

On behalf of Drummoyne Community Centre Inc

REFERENCES

KPMG & Groundswell Foundation, 2023. *Connections Matter – a report on the impacts of loneliness in Australia*. <https://www.groundswellfoundation.com.au/post/connections-matter-a-report-on-the-impacts-of-loneliness-in-australia>

Fakoyi, McCorry & Donnelly, 2020 . *Loneliness and social isolation interventions for older adults: a scoping review of reviews*. <https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-020-8251-6#:~:text=Approximately%2050%25%20of%20individuals%20aged,later%20in%20life%20%5B3%5D.>

Badcock, Holt-Lunstad, Garcia, Bombaci & Lim (2022). *Position Statement: Addressing Loneliness and Social Isolation and the Power of Human Connection*. Global Initiative on Loneliness and Connection.