

**Submission  
No 115**

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

**Organisation:** Pottsville Beach Neighbourhood Centre

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# Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation.

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## Introduction

PBNC has been operating at Pottsville for the past 24 years, coordinating community development initiatives, and offering connection and support for communities in Tweed Shire and neighbouring local government areas (LGAs). We have a 'no wrong door' practice, and people access our services, programs and events even if they are residing outside our LGA.

Neighbourhood and community centres (NCCs) in NSW play a key role in communities by reducing social isolation through volunteering, offering social activity and community-led groups, using local knowledge to connect community members with each other and partner organisations, and offering support to vulnerable individuals, families and groups during crises 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 both 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*).

## 1) Loneliness and social isolation in Pottsville/Tweed Coast Region

Example 1: Our volunteer program supports almost 200 people per annum to assist with operating our social enterprises (op shop, markets and technology centre) and our busy, multi-faceted human services centre. Our bi-annual surveys have consistently yielded 95% or higher satisfaction ratings by volunteers associated with our centre. They attribute increased feelings of wellbeing, a greater sense of self, and connectedness to others, by being enabled to participate in productive and purposeful pursuits here. They say that they feel included, empowered to use their life experience and skills, and enabled to develop new skills with support from peers and staff. One of the key findings in our surveys is that they develop friendships that would not have ordinarily occurred, had it not been for our centre. They also said that beyond their engagement at PBNC they have expanded their social activities and encouraged others within the community to volunteer at our centre. We grow our volunteer numbers through word-of-mouth recommendations. Respondents said:

- *“When my husband died, I lost confidence in going out in public. Shopping was causing me anxiety and I was becoming depressed. I was also feeling invisible and incredibly lonely with grown-up children and grandchildren living interstate. One day a woman I barely knew (who lived a few houses down the street) saw me in my garden and struck up a conversation. She suggested that I join PBNC as a volunteer in the op shop. She said that volunteering there saved her sanity (and possibly her life) after her husband died suddenly 22 years ago. She told me that she was about to reach her 20-year milestone in volunteering with PBNC. I thought it wouldn’t hurt to give it a try. I was impressed with the friendliness there and everyone was so kind. Through this enjoyable work, my anxiety and depressive moods have considerably diminished. I look forward to seeing friends who are co-workers and customers, and we always manage to have a laugh together.”*
- *“The second-hand furniture store at PBNC has given me a sense of purpose that I thought I would not experience again after being medically retired due to work-related trauma. I moved from Melbourne to live in Pottsville a few years ago to try to make a fresh start. It was recommended to me to volunteer with the neighbourhood centre as they had opportunities for volunteering that were mostly managed by a group of male volunteers – set up a bit like a men’s shed. I was welcomed with open arms and my roles include sales and picking up and delivering furniture that has been donated or bought. I enjoy the interactions I have with the public and cheeky banter with co-workers and the team that I call ‘the upstairs mob’ (staff). I have met so many thoughtful and kind people through this place: a place for everyone. I enjoy coming to ‘work’ each week and I know that it has helped me in my recovery.”*

Example 2: A new doctor to our town came to visit PBNC one day to find out more about us. He was impressed with so many people having a role in our busy centre and the range of activities that focused on building capacity in our community. Over the course of his time here, he started tracking the health status of his many older patients and formed the view that the patients he saw who were engaged in volunteering at PBNC had much better health outcomes than those who didn't volunteer at PBNC. This was incredibly heartening to hear – even though we expected it to be the case through our own anecdotal evidence.

Before we were aware of the term 'social prescribing', this local doctor was already doing it! He recommended to all his patients that if they had time to spare, and if they were feeling lonely or isolated, to sign up to become a part of the volunteer team at PBNC.

Example 3: We are seeing an increase in women and their children who have been subjected to domestic abuse. We are an active member of the local domestic violence integrated response committee as PBNC is innovative in bringing women together and addressing gaps in their recovery. Through many one-on-one conversations between the women and our experienced staff, common themes emerge, including being cut off from their friends and family. This is particularly pertinent to women who have English as a second language. In their case they have additional barriers to connection because their families and networks are overseas. Their trauma is exacerbated by ex-partners using threats of homelessness, child removal and deportation. We also noticed that many women who sought our services and support were also primary carers for children with additional needs. In almost all cases women were also living below the poverty line.

When we consulted with others (community and businesses) on the issue of gaps in supporting women recovering from domestic abuse, we were approached by a local hospitality business group to provide chef-prepared meals to enhance our existing food support and group programs. From this initial discussion, a weekly group activity emerged. Meals were supplied by several restaurants for our weekly pop-up restaurant dining experience for the women. The Table activity enables women to sit, talk, savour good food and enjoy one another's company in the privacy of our group spaces. Sharing quality food together is nurturing and comments from participants speak volumes about the power of this connection in a culturally safe and trauma-informed space. See comments below:

- *“When I was asked about the type of activities that would help my loneliness, I said that I miss going out for a meal. I couldn't remember the last time that I was able to afford a restaurant meal. I was thrilled to learn that PBNC had decided to start The Table activity. I attend and it's something that I get excited about*

*because not only have I made friends, and get to share delicious food, I know that I can truly relax and start to heal among women who understand me.”*

- *“I have no time for socialising. This makes me feel lighter after I leave here, it feels as though a load of bricks are lifted from my body that I didn’t know I was carrying.”*
- *“I didn’t realise how long I had shut myself off from people - more because how long I had shut myself off from life because my life has been so hard, and my story isn’t nice. It was just really nice to be around really lovely women. Thank you for the beautiful afternoon.”*

## 2) Our approach to Loneliness and Isolation

Example 1: In 2004, a retired teacher/librarian approached PBNC to help her to raise awareness of the need for seniors to be connected within community and keep their minds active. We put out an expression of interest to seek seniors to play a role in co-designing, facilitating and participating in a group program at PBNC. It took about four weeks to coordinate our first **Stretch your Mind** session. Each session was self-contained and included activities based on participant preferences and neuroscientific evidence that included the following elements: music, movement, challenging and enjoyable puzzles, games and exercises that provoked thinking, and sparked imagination and conversation. The sessions ran successfully until the COVID-19 pandemic.

Example 2: **Tweed Coast Home Educators Group** was created after we noticed a lot of children being homeschooled in our area. We approached families who were using our grounds for informal socialising and visiting our op shop during school hours. They told us that they home-schooled their children because their children had additional needs (some being neurodivergent) and had suffered bullying in mainstream education. They said that home-schooling was very isolating. They knew about our centre’s community playgroups and asked if we would help them run a similar ‘play group’ for school aged children and their families at our centre so that group learning and socialising. It was highly successful and eventually morphed into two groups **Side by Side** (for primary school aged children and their families) and **Side by Side 4 Teens**.

Example 3: PBNC is a very inclusive place for people to come for connection as well as food and other material aid supports when they are experiencing the aftermath of natural disasters, financial hardship, life challenges, social isolation and loneliness. It is especially valued by those who are sleeping rough.

- *One person said “It’s hard when you don’t have a job and you don’t have shelter – especially when the weather is rough. I was feeling pretty low when I met a bloke at the creek who told me that I could get some assistance at the*

*neighbourhood centre. I didn't know what to expect. I hadn't eaten for a couple of days and was feeling exhausted, angry, hungry, wet and cold. When I rocked up to PBNC I was able to talk in private with a worker about what was happening for me. I received a home cooked meal on the spot. It was explained to me that PBNC had frozen meals to give away that had been prepared by their team of cooks. I was able to tell the worker that my belongings had been stolen, including my wallet. I was given a backpack with a tent and sleeping bag, food supplies and a fuel card so that I could fill up my motorbike and be mobile again. I was also able to visit PBNC's Centrelink Agency that same day, and also make calls to replace lost cards, etc. The worker organised a voucher for me to shop for some clothes at their op shop. I was treated so well and I have helped spread the word about PBNC because that place and all the wonderful people there helped me when I was in a very dark place."*

- *"PBNC helped us keep it together after the floods took everything. We arrived with nothing but the clothes on our backs and in shock - nothing made sense. I can't even remember who took us there or how we got there but PBNC became very important to us, it was the place where we could find out what was happening. The information, services and supports they have been provided in the time since the floods has been crucial to our wellbeing. It was our only social connection after it all happened, and it kept me from retreating away from the world. PBNC helped to keep me alive, literally. Without the assistance from workers who knew us well enough to know when we were not doing ok, I am not so sure if we'd still be here. PBNC was the nerve centre of the community, and for many of us impacted by the flooding, it kept us from feeling alone and forgotten about."*

### **3) Pottsville Beach Neighbourhood Centre**

As place-based, locally-led organisations, NCCs have an enormous role to play in reducing the impacts of loneliness at individual, family and community levels. PBNC provides opportunities for people to socialise and strengthen their networks by participating in our programs and events that reduce loneliness in our community, including: child, youth and family groups (playgroups, parenting groups, peer support groups, distance education), men's shed activities, pop-up dining experiences, volunteer appreciation events, etc.

PBNC also hires spaces for independent groups and services to enrich and increase people's quality of life through the activities that they provide.

At PBNC, volunteering also plays a major role in reducing social isolation. PBNC engages approximately 200 volunteers per week, resulting in over 1000 hours. As well as the value of social connections, volunteers give a total value in kind of \$10 billion per year.

- o *One volunteer recently said, "After being referred to PBNC to work off my traffic fines on a work development order, I couldn't believe how helpful and friendly everyone was. The volunteer support worker put me through a thorough induction process and I began my first shift the next day. We were all called community workers so it's a very equal workplace. I volunteered in the Technology Centre and felt valued for the contributions I made as a digital mentor is helping seniors to increase their skills to navigate the digital world. When my fines were paid off, I continued to volunteer my time here. My life has been enriched by the work that I have done and the friends that I have made. I really didn't realise just how empty and lonely my life had become before joining the PBNC team. I love this community and PBNC, and the way that I am treated."*

If the NSW Government invested further into PBNC, we would be able to better plan for future sustainability and community resilience by hiring a community development worker, scoping issues through community conversations and running regular social activities for people of all ages, stages and backgrounds - based on identified community need. Our role as a social connector would flourish.

An example of the need to invest in neighbourhood centres for broad relief and resilience in times of natural disasters is summarised below. (Source: NCOSS Submission to the NSW Reconstruction Authority and NCOSS AfterShock Series)

In the past five years, NCOSS has focused on the impacts of natural disasters on vulnerable populations and the services supporting them. The connection between social disadvantage and disaster vulnerability is well understood in social services. Events like bushfires, COVID-19, floods, and storms have highlighted how emergencies disproportionately affect those with low income, health issues, disabilities, age-related challenges, discrimination, and social isolation. Direct impacts include trauma and displacement, while broader social issues such as increased domestic violence, mental health struggles, and housing insecurity have also emerged, as detailed in NCOSS's AfterShock series. Although our sector's formal role in emergencies is limited, we have actively participated in all phases of disaster management. This involvement is documented in various reports and case studies, underscoring the essential role of social services, like neighbourhood centres, in disaster preparedness and resilience.

#### **4) Neighbourhood Centres, Loneliness and Social Isolation**

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 benefit NCCs in NSW.

As loneliness and social isolation increases in society 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 social 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.

The peak body for NSW NCCs, the Local Community Services Association (LCSA), outlines its core funding model below, based on 2.5FTE minimum staff required for a safe working model. Our centre, 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, 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
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$316,388</b>	<b>\$55,367,912</b>

Core funding means that all NCCs can respond to social isolation and loneliness no matter how 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 this 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.

## 5) Conclusion

PBNC’s vision is to **“maintain and support a community that is strong, inclusive and connected”**. Examples of how we are striving to achieve this vision are documented in aforementioned examples, comments and feedback.



National Neighbourhood Centre Week's motto in 2024 was "Stronger Together". NCCs are the beating heart of local communities. 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.