

Submission
No 120

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

Organisation: City of Sydney
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30 October 2024

Our Ref: 2024/569519

Standing Committee on Social Issues

To whom it may concern,

City of Sydney submission to the Inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales

The City of Sydney (“the City”) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales.

We welcome the NSW Government’s intention to look at steps the State Government can take to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in the community.

This inquiry could be an important step forward in addressing the growing epidemic of loneliness and social isolation, and their negative economic, physical and mental health impacts.

The City plays a key role along with community-based organisations through delivering environments and programs that connect people in our community. We would welcome further close collaboration with us during the future development of any recommendations and programs that result from the inquiry.

Should you wish to speak with a Council officer about the City’s submission, please contact Vanessa Gordon, Manager Social Strategy, at

Yours sincerely

Monica Barone PSM
Chief Executive Officer

Parliamentary inquiry into loneliness in New South Wales



Submission
1 November 2024

The City of Sydney acknowledges the Gadigal of the Eora Nation as the Traditional Custodians of our local area.

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1.1 Executive Summary

*“Evidence shows that social connection is a force for health, wellbeing and economic good”*¹
World Health Organisation

The City of Sydney (the City) supports the inquiry into and report on the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in NSW (the inquiry). This inquiry could be an important step forward in addressing the growing epidemic of loneliness, and its negative economic, physical and mental health impacts.²

As the World Health Organisation has identified *“A large body of research shows that social isolation and loneliness have a serious impact on physical and mental health, quality of life, and longevity. The effect of social isolation and loneliness on mortality is comparable to that of other well-established risk factors such as smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity.”*³

Social isolation is a complex problem, and all levels of government have a role to play in supporting people to be more connected.

Communities can connect in many ways. They can connect around

- places – people’s local neighbourhoods, the local dog park, schools, the community centre or the local cafe, around places such as where you live or work. Communities of place also include groups of people who hold a particular connection to a place because of its historical or cultural significance.
- Interests - people’s connection around an issue or activity, for example business chambers, resident action groups, interagency networks and sporting or recreational clubs.
- common identity, values and beliefs - these include First Nations communities, people of diverse sexualities and genders, culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Within communities there may be smaller groups, such as trans and gender diverse communities. It is important to remember that there is diversity within these communities.
- need - may be people who face food insecurity, housing stress or homelessness and economic hardship. They may have difficulty accessing services, including digital information channels
- future – the importance of children and young people and considering the communities of the future⁴

A holistic approach that is community-focussed and delivered to support social sustainability is needed. This includes affordable support and care for individuals, systemic changes to address cost of living impacts that limit connections, and increased NSW Government support for free and low-cost community-based spaces and programs that bring people together in a connected city.

A city for all, our social sustainability policy and action plan, identifies that a connected city is one where people trust each other and are willing to help each other out in times of need, feel welcome and have a sense of belonging. They feel free to be who they are, inspired to

¹ https://cdn.who.int/media/images/default-source/groups/who-commission-on-social-connection/evidence-shows-that-social-connection-is-a-force-for-health--well-being--and-economic-good.jpg?sfvrsn=2d5f06e8_3

² <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/what-we-do/research-impact-policy-advocacy/youth-survey?gad>

³ <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/social-isolation-and-loneliness>

⁴ <https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/-/media/corporate/files/publications/strategies-action-plans/community-engagement-strategy/community-engagement-strategy-and-cpp-2024-update---adopted-24-june-2024.pdf?download=true>

actively participate in their community and contribute to the cultural life of the city.⁵ A lack of social connection has been identified in the City's Resilience Strategy 2023 as a chronic stressor that limits our ability to adapt proactively to change and unexpected events.⁶

There are several studies that identify the importance of our role. The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) study, found that higher levels of interaction and contact are less likely to feel lonely.⁷ The Scanlon Foundation annual Australian-wide survey found that people with a sense of belonging in their neighbourhood are significantly less likely to feel isolated and more likely to be happy and trust other people.⁸

Currently the responsibility to support community connection is predominately with local council, community and non-government organisations, however the value of this is not adequately recognised or supported. The local social and community infrastructure we provide supports community connection and our front-line workers not only provide a range of programs and facilities to connect people but are often the first to be contacted for support. The outcomes and programs developed following the inquiry must engage local councils early in their development..

1.2 Purpose of the submission

This document provides the City of Sydney's (the City) submission to the NSW [parliamentary inquiry](#) into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales.

The inquiry follows the findings of a 2022 Mental Health Commission survey on community and wellbeing that found almost 40% of NSW residents experience loneliness at varying degrees, with those facing mental health challenges almost twice as likely to feel isolated.

The inquiry was referred to the parliamentary Standing Committee on Social Issues by Minister for Mental Health Rose Jackson.

1.3 Terms of reference

The City's submission will respond directly to the Inquiry's [Terms of reference](#):

- (a) the extent of loneliness and social isolation in NSW and how this is measured and recorded, including opportunities for additional and/or improved data capture
- (b) the identification of populations most at risk of loneliness and social isolation
- (c) evidence of the psychological and physiological impacts of loneliness on people, including young people, the elderly, those living with a disability, those living in regional areas and the bereaved
- (d) evidence linking social connection to physical health
- (e) factors that contribute to the development of transient loneliness into chronic loneliness

⁵ <https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/strategies-action-plans/social-sustainability-policy-action-plan>

⁶ <https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/strategies-action-plans/resilience-strategy>

⁷ https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/4841909/HILDA_Statistical_Report_2023.pdf

⁸ <https://scanloninstitute.org.au/sites/default/files/2023-11/2023%20Mapping%20Social%20Cohesion%20Report.pdf>

(f) the financial costs of loneliness to the NSW budget and the state economy and steps that can be taken to reduce the financial burden of loneliness

(g) the identification of existing initiatives by government and non-government organisations to mitigate and reduce loneliness and social isolation

(h) developments in other jurisdictions regarding the implementation of policies and initiatives relevant to the treatment of loneliness as a public health issue

(i) steps the State Government can take to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in the community

(j) steps that community, technology/social media companies, organisations, and individuals can take to reduce impact of loneliness on individuals and the community; and

(k) any other related matters

The relevant Terms of Reference are identified under the headings of this submission and should not be read exclusively as relevant to that section as there is significant connections between the issues addressed.

1.4 Support for inquiry with clear broadened scope and strength-based approach

*“Evidence shows that social connection is a force for health, wellbeing and economic good”*⁹

We know the risks of lacking social connection can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.¹⁰ In addition, poor or insufficient social connection is associated with increased risk of disease, including a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke. Furthermore, it is associated with increased risk for anxiety, depression, and dementia¹¹.

Social isolation needs to be clearly defined and considered alongside loneliness in the inquiry as both have seriously impact quality of life outcomes but are different. Without this, the research is likely to be incorrectly attributed and interventions not effectively designed, planned, resourced and delivered. The responses should also follow a strength-based approach with a focus on building social connection.

A person may be socially isolated but not lonely or be socially connected but feel lonely.¹² The Mental Health Commission categorises loneliness as *“a subjective emotional state characterised by negative feelings stemming from a perceived lower level of social contact compared to one’s desired level”*. Social isolation means having objectively few social relationships or roles and infrequent social contact.

⁹ https://cdn.who.int/media/images/default-source/groups/who-commission-on-social-connection/evidence-shows-that-social-connection-is-a-force-for-health--well-being--and-economic-good.jpg?sfvrsn=2d5f06e8_3

¹⁰ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

¹² <https://www.aihw.gov.au/mental-health/topic-areas/social-isolation-and-loneliness>

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: NSW Government clearly define both loneliness and social isolation in following reports and show data around risks, impacts and evidence-based interventions for both.

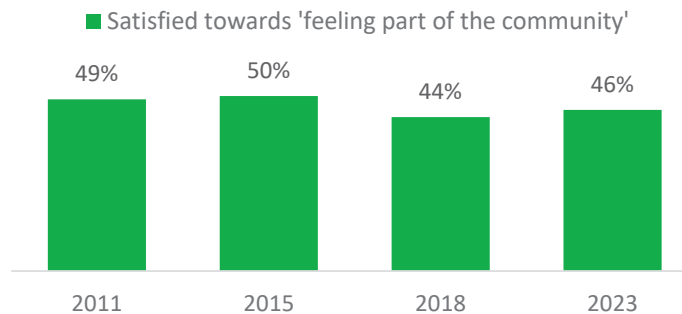
Recommendation 2: NSW Government as the lead for the response provide an opportunity for local councils to contribute and be engaged early in the development of programs to address loneliness and social isolation.

1.5 The extent of loneliness and social isolation and how this is measured and recorded (terms of reference - a)

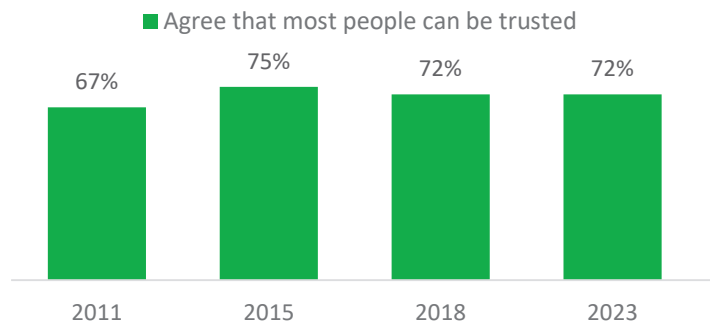
Communities across NSW are feeling lonelier than ever. The Mental Health Commission of NSW (the Commission) found almost half of NSW residents reported experiencing feelings related to loneliness 'some of the time' or 'often'.¹³

The City measures community connection every three to four years through our Community Wellbeing Survey and uses indicators for feeling part of the community, agreeing that most people can be trusted and that when needed, they can get help from their neighbours.

In 2023, 46% of respondents say they are satisfied with feeling part of the community, a slight improvement from the 2018 results (44%), but lower than the proportion of respondents who say the same in 2011 (49%) and 2015 (50%).

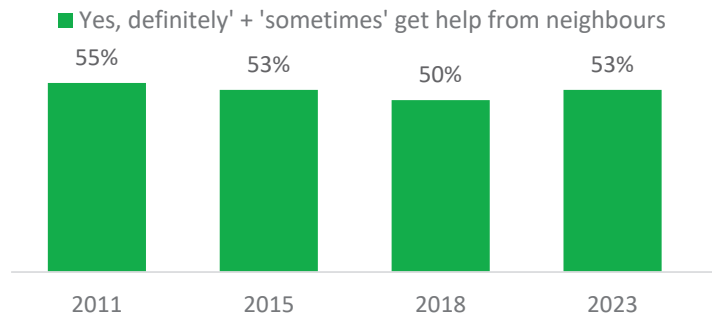


Agreement that most people can be trusted in 2023 remains consistent with 2018 results (72% for both survey years), though remains lower than results seen in 2015 (75%).

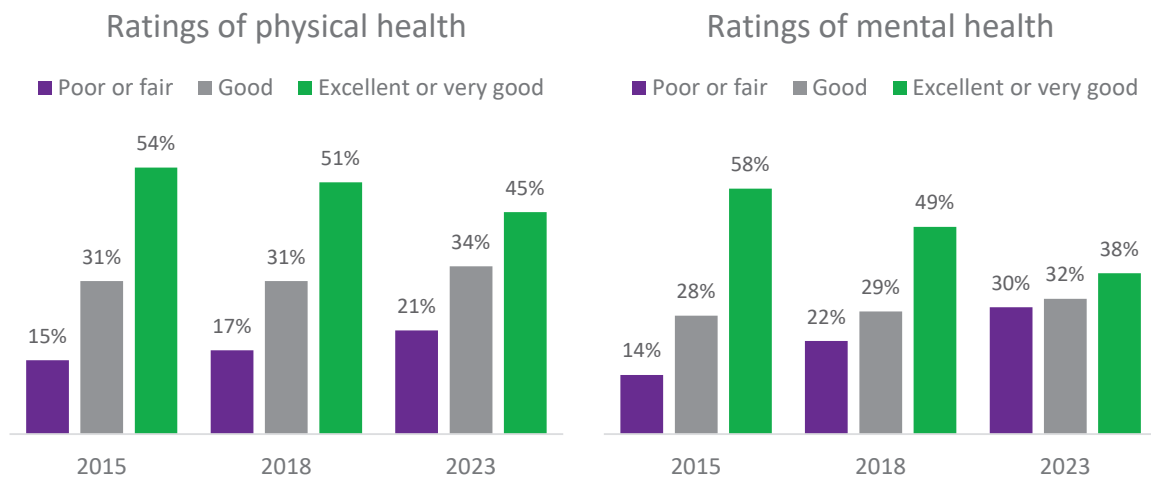


¹³ <https://www.nswmentalhealthcommission.com.au/sites/default/files/2023-11/Loneliness%20in%20Focus%20Report.pdf>

Asked if they can get help from their neighbours when needed, 53% of respondents say 'yes, definitely' or 'sometimes' in 2023, an increase from results seen in 2018 (50%), but still below the 2011 baseline (55%).



We also ask about our resident's perception of their physical health and mental health. The wellbeing survey (2023) found that residents who rate their physical health and mental health as being 'very good' or 'excellent' have both declined over time. Ratings of mental health have dropped 20 percentage points, from 58% in 2015 to 38% in 2023.



These are not local issues, with psychological distress at the national and state level has been on the rise over the past decade. Consistent and regular data collection is needed that can be provided at least through a local government level to support partnerships and collaboration across all levels of government and to inform both programs for individuals and programs run local facilities, programs and services.

Recommendations:

Recommendation 3: The NSW government include measures of loneliness, community connection and trust in the proposed NSW Performance and Wellbeing Framework and make these available at a local government level. NSW Health, Homes NSW and other service agencies to include this measure in their impact and outcome measures.

Recommendation 4: NSW resource Councils to support data collection, management and reporting on wellbeing including social connection.

1.6 Groups experiencing higher levels of loneliness (terms of reference b)



Free beginner sewing day. Photo: Cassandra Hannagan/City of Sydney

While social isolation can impact anyone during their lives, there are some groups experiencing this at higher levels and that need additional support to overcome barriers to social connection and inclusion. This must be done in consultation with people with lived experience to ensure effective and culturally appropriate services and programs.

A number of studies have identified where some communities face barriers including:

- The 2023 Groundswell Foundation report found that groups have higher rates than others included young adults at particularly high risk, with 37–50% of people aged 18–24 reported to be lonely. Parents, particularly single parents, older people and people who live alone are also more impacted. First Nations people, those who identify as LGBTQIA+ and migrants were found to experience higher levels of loneliness compared to national averages.¹⁴
- The [Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia \(HILDA\) survey](#), shows that levels of loneliness are highest among those who are living alone or are single parents, people born in non-English speaking countries, the unemployed, persons living in areas of most socioeconomic disadvantage, and those who have long-term health conditions, and is increasing in younger people.¹⁵
- A 2020 [report](#) by the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine also highlights immigrants and people who identify as LGBTQ+ as being at higher risk¹⁶.

Our local government area has a young and diverse community, and many of our residents are living alone and in medium to high density housing. Inner Sydney is also seeing an increase in loneliness, with a highly mobile population, many households speaking a

¹⁴ <https://www.groundswellfoundation.com.au/post/connections-matter-a-report-on-the-impacts-of-loneliness-in-australia>

¹⁵ <https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/hilda>

¹⁶ <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/25663/social-isolation-and-loneliness-in-older-adults-opportunities-for-the>

language other than English at home and a high proportion of people living on their own. Despite our living closer together, we need to promote opportunities for human connection.¹⁷

Our community is living in an increasing high-density environment. Our Wellbeing survey measures whether an individual has regular contact with their neighbours. Almost half (47.3%) of respondents only see their neighbours 'sometimes' or 'never'. This is more likely for people who don't speak English at home (65.0%), who moved to the City within the last three years (56.1%), are living alone (52.9%), and with a mental health condition (52.1%).

People experiencing loneliness and social isolation may represent more than one of the groups more impacted than the general population, and engagement with the community that has lived experience and with the services providing front line support will be essential in the development of any response.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community



Smoking Ceremony at Redfern Community Centre. Photo: Abril Felman/City of Sydney

For many First Nations peoples, feelings of loneliness can be linked to risk factors including separation from Country, family and community, historical trauma, and racism. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a survey of the Stolen Generations (referring to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were removed from their families between 1910 and 1970) revealed how their separation from culture and community caused increased feelings of loneliness. More than 90% reported feeling disconnected from family and community, and more than 80% of respondents had increased feelings of loneliness.¹⁸

To support culturally appropriate responses, programs should be community led. . Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled and run organisations are best placed to develop programs for social connection that support self-determination and are culturally appropriate

¹⁷ <https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/research-reports/public-spaces-public-life-studies>

¹⁸ <https://www.groundswellfoundation.com.au/post/connections-matter-a-report-on-the-impacts-of-loneliness-in-australia>

People on low income

The current cost of living and housing crisis is negatively impacting our ability to connect, often with detrimental impacts on people's physical and mental health. Poverty and financial insecurity are key drivers of loneliness and isolation, and a key intersecting factor for many of those in our community that are more at risk.

The 2023 NCOSS report on cost-of-living pressures for people living below the poverty line and in low-income households found that groups already facing barriers and challenges are disproportionately bearing the brunt of our cost-of-living crisis.¹⁹

It found for those below the poverty line are at greater risk of experiencing social isolation. Less than half (45%) have gone out with family or friends to do indoor or outdoor activities two or more times in the last month, which is significantly fewer than those in the low-income bracket (60%). Similarly, those below the poverty line are less likely to have visited or been visited by friends, than those on a low income (63% and 70%, respectively).

People of diverse sexualities and genders, and intersex people

Australian people of diverse sexualities and genders, and intersex people report higher levels of loneliness than members of the general population. LGBTIQ+ Australians report significantly increased levels of social isolation and mental health issues, including depression and social anxiety.²⁰ Existing literature shows that these populations experience disproportionately higher rates of mental health issues, and poorer life satisfaction compared to the general population.²¹

[Private Lives](#), the largest study of LGBTIQ+ Health and Wellbeing in Australia highlights people are often challenged by significant levels of stigma and discrimination.

LGBTIQ+ communities, particularly young people and those coming out, can suffer social isolation and loneliness as a result of family rejection, resulting domestic, family and sexual violence, mental health, disability, homelessness and being from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.

We engage local LGBTIQ+ communities through a range of social programs and events, supporting them to feel welcome, safe and included, and address discrimination and other barriers to inclusion. In recognition of the increased rates of social isolation of LBQITA+ women over 55, the City delivers a series of events each year co-designed with participants.

The City marks Wear it Purple Day annually in celebration of rainbow young people recognising that many rainbow young people are not connected to community, face stigma and discrimination and may be rejected by their families of origin. There are also drop-in meet up sessions for young LGBTIQ+ community members in our libraries.

The City recently developed LGBTIQ+ inclusion training free of charge to members of the Oxford Street Pride Business Charter and City staff to assist with awareness and understanding of people of diverse sexualities and genders and how to be an inclusive business.

¹⁹ https://www.ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/NCOSS_CostOfLiving2023_FINAL.pdf

²⁰ <https://www.groundswellfoundation.com.au/post/connections-matter-a-report-on-the-impacts-of-loneliness-in-australia>

²¹ <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/work/private-lives-3>

The Latrobe University report, writing themselves in, identified that families, allies and communities provide essential social support, and it is crucial that these are scaled up wherever possible to ensure safe spaces for LGBTIQ+ young people to live and grow.²²

*“Community connection. The affirmative role and impact of LGBTQA+ community connection is significant. Engaging with other LGBTQA+ young people provide opportunities for shared learning, peer support and collective advocacy.”*²³

Not all people have easy access to community events or support and in some cases may be limited by challenges such as their health or where they live. Many of the LGBTIQ+ community may access social media, and such online forums can also be beneficial in further connecting and engaging people, and should be led by people of diverse genders and sexualities.²⁴

New arrivals (migrants, international students, refugees and people seeking asylum) and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Migrants from non-English speaking countries report higher levels of loneliness compared to non-migrant Australians and migrants from English speaking countries. Around 20% of Migrants arriving through humanitarian arrangements report loneliness as a stressor post-migration and are more likely to develop other health problems, when compared to humanitarian migrants who never experience loneliness.²⁵

Our local government area is one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse areas in NSW and Australia. Almost 50% of our residents were born overseas, and more than a third speak a language other than English at home. The City is also home to a significant number of international students.

The City's delivers social programs and events to support new arrivals and culturally and linguistically diverse communities to feel welcome, safe and included. Initiatives support social cohesion and inclusion and address racial discrimination and other barriers to inclusion. Each year the City celebrates Refugee Week and Lunar New Year, and marks International Day Against the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Refugees and people seeking asylum can access our libraries and community centres programs for free and can apply for an access card that provides a reduced rate for access to our aquatic and fitness centres and tennis courts.

Loneliness is prevalent among international students. Recent research shows that international students are at increased risk of experiencing loneliness, anxiety and poor mental health as a result with isolation from families and culture, language barriers, financial stress and academic pressures among the key drivers.²⁶

Each year, we also host the Lord Mayor's International Students Welcome. Bringing together community groups, health and safety services and leading tertiary education providers, and an opportunity for students to create connections and support networks.

The initiative is complemented by our International Student Leadership and Ambassador (ISLA) program, offering free training, work-integrated learning and volunteering

²² https://www.latrobe.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1198945/Writing-Themselves-In-4-National-report.pdf

²³ https://www.latrobe.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1198945/Writing-Themselves-In-4-National-report.pdf

²⁴ <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/work/private-lives-3>

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/International-network/Australia/InternationalStrategy/EGIPProjects/Documents/ORYPGEN%20-%20International%20Student%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Physical%20Safety%20June%202020.pdf>

opportunities for international students. The program provides opportunities to build student social networks outside their academic institutions and opportunities to socially connect and increase a sense of belonging. We work with international students to co-design community programs and events and student ambassadors tell us that isolation, loneliness and connections to local communities and culture are key issues.

There is continued demand for support for these communities to build community networks that are safe, welcoming and inclusive, and for racism and discrimination not be tolerated and addressed immediately.

Young adults

The 2023 Mission Australia Youth Survey found 20.8% of young people aged 15–19 felt lonely all or most of the time, with a higher proportion of gender-diverse young people (44.9%) and 29.7% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander reported feeling lonely all or most of the time, including 30.5% of females and 24.3% of males.²⁷

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare identified that over 1 in 6 (16%) Australians were experiencing loneliness with an increasing number of people aged 15–24.²⁸ The 2024 Monash Youth (16 – 24 years) Barometer found more than half (57%) of young people aged 18–25 identified feeling lonely as one of their main issues.^{29 30}

Young people are consulted on the types of activities and programming provided and can make suggestions for future programs, activities and outings. Our youth opportunities program aims to empower young people to have a voice, act on matters that concern them and actively contribute to shaping significant City of Sydney events. It supports people aged 15 to 24 to build transferrable professional skills, increase confidence and make a real impact in the [our local government area](#) through program design.

We also deliver a diverse range of free and affordable cultural, social and recreational programs and events for young people, including in community centres, community facilities, recreation centres, in the public domain and across the City's library network. Programs and events are free and/or low cost, reducing barriers to participation. Free transport is also provided for programs such as school holiday activities.

Older People

Older people are vulnerable to experiencing loneliness, with UK research estimating that one-third of adults aged over 60 experience loneliness. Risk factors include family separation, decreased mobility, financial difficulties, loss of loved ones, and poor health.

It is thought that societal change, including reduced inter-generational living, greater geographical mobility and less cohesive communities, have also contributed to higher levels of loneliness in the older population.³¹ Older people living alone, and in nursing homes are particularly vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness.

Our community centres and libraries engage older people with a range of free and low-cost programs and events to reduce social isolation and loneliness. We promote these throughout the year on our What's On event listing guide, have open days and celebrate Seniors Festival in an effort to promoting positive ageing and community connections.

²⁷ <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/what-we-do/research-impact-policy-advocacy/youth-survey?gad>

²⁸ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/mental-health/topic-areas/social-isolation-and-loneliness>

²⁹ <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/what-we-do/research-impact-policy-advocacy/youth-survey?gad>

³⁰ https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/report/The_2024_Australian_Youth_Barometer/26212346?file=48010954

³¹ <https://www.groundswellfoundation.com.au/post/connectionsmatter-a-report-on-the-impacts-of-loneliness-in-australia>

We also connect every month with about 4,000 nutritious meals to people at home, available to residents of our local area and part of Sydney's inner west who are 65 and over (50 and over for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people) or approved for funding under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

Our 2 community transport services provide affordable options for people who have difficulty using public transport for residents and visitors to commute to and from our programs, events and facilities. Access Sydney Community Transport, supported by the City of Sydney, offers a shuttle bus service, shopping bus service and individual transport services.

The system of National and State level support for older people is difficult to navigate and not able to meet demand. More is needed across Federal and State government across aged care assessments and additional support for services to be provided in the home and also acknowledging and supporting our role and connection to community.

New parents

Loneliness and social isolation also impact at certain life stages for many people. Becoming a parent is one of those times. Parents with children under the age of 18 are at an increased risk of experiencing loneliness, with approximately 48% of Australian parents experiencing high levels of loneliness, with one of the risk factors being social support not meeting their needs and difficulties in seeking support, and single parents can be specifically vulnerable.

³²

We offer a range of activities for new parents to connect with others including:

- Rhymetime and Storytime at our Darling Square, Glebe, Green Square and Surry Hills libraries during school terms.
- Mums and Bubs groups, including at the Maybanke Centre in Pyrmont.
- Playgroups, including at the Harry Jensen Community Centre in Millers Point, and a Russian Playgroup at the Reginald Murphy Community Centre in Potts Point.
- two NSW Health Child and Family Health service centres at Glebe Town Hall and the Reginald Murphy Community Centre, Potts Point.

Public open spaces are also vital, and we have a range of green and open spaces available, and lots of playgrounds, some have equipment for older kids while others have safe, fenced spaces for toddlers and younger children.

Renters including people living in social housing

“Access to good quality, affordable housing is fundamental to wellbeing. It can help reduce poverty and enhance equality of opportunity, social inclusion and mobility”³³

Housing tenure and security can impact peoples feeling of loneliness and social isolation.³⁴ The City has the highest proportion of social housing than any other local government in Australia, including high-rise public housing estates at Waterloo, Redfern, and Surry Hills.

Social housing residents are at a higher risk of experiencing loneliness and social isolation with a 2023 survey of 320 Waterloo public housing residents, commissioned by the Waterloo Collaborative, provides a snapshot of resident's experience of loneliness. The survey found that 64% of respondents reported feeling lonely often or some of the time and only 21%

³² *ibid*

³³ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/housing-affordability>

³⁴ <https://theconversation.com/why-loneliness-is-both-an-individual-thing-and-a-shared-result-of-the-cities-we-create-198069>

reported that they had never felt lonely in the last 4 weeks. This is exacerbated by stigma associated with public housing estates where residents may feel marginalized or ashamed due to the negative perception of social housing.



Pet Day Waterloo Green. Photo: Damian Shaw/City of Sydney

In NSW, approximately 80% of newly allocated households are from the priority waitlist, with highest need is determined by an applicant's proximity to homelessness. Social housing comprises of many of the groups most at risk of loneliness and social isolation, including those who live alone, are older, are single parents, are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, culturally and linguistically diverse, are living in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage, are unemployed, and those who have long-term health conditions including disability.

The NSW Governments' Future Directions for Social Housing in NSW described social housing as "a safety net for the most vulnerable in the community". However, Future Directions does not frame resident wellbeing as a priority.

A. Individuals and wellbeing: People in social housing can require additional support to manage their wellbeing and also their tenancy which may be precarious due to the complex nature of their needs.

Homes NSW staff should be supported to ask questions relating to a resident's wellbeing, or if the resident is over 65, to inquire whether they are connected to My Aged Care supports. For residents who are socially isolated and living alone, such interventions could potentially have a significant impact on their wellbeing and are able to connect them to services that can support them to live independently.

B. Placemaking and wellbeing: Decades of underinvestment in social housing in Australia has resulted in a both a shortage of social housing to meet demand, and poorly maintained housing stock. A dedicated effort is needed to centre people holistically in social housing through planned asset renewal and a placemaking approach that considers governance of public spaces, and the community-based programs offered.

While the City offers a range of free and low-cost social programs from City libraries and community centres, additional programs and quality facilities need to be provided in social housing estates and considered priorities in social housing renewal.

Communal spaces and community centres within housing estates play an important role in social connection. However, many of the community rooms located in public housing estates across the inner city lack the maintenance upkeep and programming required. Involving residents in the design and development of these centres, and other public spaces, supports residents to take ownership, foster pride and create stronger connections to their homes and neighbours, aiding efforts to combat loneliness and social isolation.

Beyond assets, community development programs in social housing communities promote social cohesion, enhance resident wellbeing, and empower communities to become involved in the decisions that affect them. Local community organisations are bets placed to build connections and trust with the social housing communities.

In 2018, the Housing Communities Assistance Program (HCAP) and Tenant Participation Resource Service (TPRS), run by local community non-government organisations were abolished and replaced with a scaled-back program and given to a single statewide provider branded Tenant Participation and Community Engagement (TPCE).

A placemaking approach that fully engaged, resourced local organisations with connections to the community, and took a holistic approach to the lifecycle of a place is needed. Future Directions does propose 'Place Plans' that aim to improve educational outcomes, access to services and improved physical environments among other outcomes. However, the City has not seen evidence of their implementation or how we and other organisations will be supported to put in place actions that have attributed to us.

A policy framework that focuses on fostering community connections, enhancing social opportunities, supporting resident wellbeing and improving the built environment is required to address loneliness and social isolation in social housing is needed.

People with disability

Loneliness is a significant driver of poor wellbeing among people with disability, who experience loneliness, low perceived social support and social isolation at much higher rates than people without disability.³⁵

Evidence shows that, not only do people with disability have increased risk of loneliness, but that the related. In Australia, people with disability are more likely to experience social isolation and loneliness than people without disability. In 2021, 1 in 5 (19%) people with disability aged 15–64 experienced social isolation, compared with 9.5% without disability.³⁶

A 2024 study found people with disability were 1.5 to 1.9 times more likely to experience loneliness and inequalities in loneliness were more substantial for people with intellectual or cognitive disabilities, psychological disability, and brain injury or stroke.³⁷

A recent survey to inform our new inclusion disability action plan, found that 45% of people with disability reported either 'always' or 'often' experiencing loneliness or social isolation, compared to just 17.5% who reported 'hardly ever' or 'never' experiencing these. For family members and carers of people with disability, the respective figures were 37% and 18.5%.

³⁵ Emerson et al (2021) Loneliness, social support, social isolation and wellbeing among working age adults with and without disability: Cross-sectional study. Accessible via: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7403030/>

³⁶ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/social-support/social-inclusion>

³⁷ Bishop et al (2024) Disability-related inequalities in the prevalence of loneliness across the lifespan: trends from Australia, 2023 to 2020. Accessible via: <https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-024-17936-w#:~:text=Furthermore%2C%20people%20with%20disability%20have,and%20community%20support%20%5B5%5D.>

People with disability face various barriers to participation in society, including those related to discrimination that create a greater risk of isolation and loneliness than experienced by those without disability. Social support enables people with disability to participate in many facets of life. Informal support, often by family, friends and the larger community can assist people with disability to be included in society.

In order to address loneliness and promote a greater sense of belonging and connection to place, our current Inclusion (disability) action plan 2021-25 includes actions around:

- delivering inclusive community, learning, sport and recreation programs and major events that ensure equitable access and participation for people with disability.
- Provide programming that empowers people to manage their stressors and social and emotional wellbeing.

We are currently developing our new inclusion (disability) action plan. In a widely distributed survey inviting feedback and insights from people with lived experience of disability, family members, carers, and disability service providers, we have specifically included a question designed to capture and measure the rates of social isolation in our community.

Role of primary health care

The important role of General Practitioners and our public health networks needs to be recognised with support for innovative approaches that can connect people to local spaces and places to connect . Further support is needed for initiatives including social prescriptions, as a means for healthcare workers to connect people to a range of non-clinical services in the community to improve health and wellbeing.³⁸

Social prescribing can help to address the underlying causes of wellbeing issues, as opposed to simply treating the symptoms. Social prescribing can take various forms, but all involve connecting patients to resources in their communities based on individual needs. funding to expand local initiatives such as what is provided by Central and Eastern Sydney Public Health Networks, can play a role to connect GPs with community infrastructure, public space and programs.³⁹

These should be co-designed with people with lived experience in groups most at risk and expanded with easy read versions of resources. We currently provide information about our community facilities and their programs through our web site including a list of local community and resident groups, our [whats on](#) pages where activities can be searched by location, groups and areas of interest, as well as information on our [public open spaces](#).

Recommendations:

Recommendation 5: NSW government acknowledge the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on the community and advocate for further financial support and to raise the rate for basic income support payments to reduce financial stress impacting many of the community most at risk of loneliness and social isolation.

Recommendation 6: NSW Government fund a collaborative approach between local health districts, public health networks and local community organisations to expand trial of social prescribing and evaluate the results. We should be engaged early in the development of the program.

³⁸ <https://www.who.int/westernpacific/activities/supporting-healthy-ageing-through-social-prescribing#:~:text=Social%20prescribing%20is%20a%20means%20of%20connecting%20patients%20to%20a,their%20health%20and%20well%20being.>

³⁹ <https://coordinare.org.au/community/service-summary/social-rx>

Recommendation 7: NSW Government provide support for programs and initiatives that are co-designed with communities most affected, people with lived experience and community organisations providing direct services. This to include but not be limited to:

- i. Fund community led organisations under a dedicated program to tackle loneliness, to collaborate as a network and also reduce the stigma associated with loneliness and social isolation
- ii. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled and run organisations are funded to develop programs for social connection that support self-determination and are culturally appropriate.
- iii. programs and initiatives that reduce barriers to participation for people with a disability, including but not limited to participation costs, transport and physical assess.
- iv. programs that foster social connection in social housing including programs that improve residents' digital literacy and access to technology and devices to reduce the digital divide.
- v. NSW government work with the Federal government on changes to Aged Care Assessment funding to ensure adequate funding and availability of transport, food and social supports in the home and links to the community.
- vi. NSW introduce a wider communications campaign to celebrate and welcome new arrivals, and address racism and discrimination and fund support for programs that connect, and support people form diverse backgrounds
- i. NSW fund community-based programs for the LGBTIQ+ community including through social media, and support inclusion programs.

Recommendation 8: The NSW government provide support for housing and accommodation providers, including Homes NSW and Community Housing Providers to provide wrap around services. This to include but not be limited to:

- ii. fund independent case management support partnering with community-based organisations.
- iii. build the capacity of client service officers to support a focus on resident wellbeing and access local services and programs.
- iv. advocate to the Federal government for wrap around services in residential age care facilities

Recommendation 9: In state-led precinct planning and asset renewal, particularly for social housing, the government should

- i. support increased tenant participation and decision making both about, and during the redevelopment process for social housing.
- ii. fund free strength-based community development and social programs by partnering with community organisations, the City, and other stakeholders to create resident-led initiatives that improve community cohesion, safety, and access to services.
- iii. fund and prioritise placemaking initiatives in partnership with local communities to encourage social connection and foster a sense of place, including the design, maintenance and operation of community rooms and public open space.
- iv. the NSW business case process acknowledges, values and requires measures to assess long term placemaking to foster social connection beyond construction, for example planning for programming of community spaces and social infrastructure post-delivery.



Ron Willimas Community Centre open day. Photo: Abril Felman/City of Sydney

1.7 Mitigating and reducing loneliness and social isolation (terms of reference g, i, j)

The evidence for effective interventions for loneliness and social isolation focus on removing barriers and providing spaces and programming that bring people together.⁴⁰ A key recommendation from the NSW Mental Health Commission following their 2023 Loneliness in Focus report is “*expanding opportunities for community engagement and cohesion*”⁴¹. One of the key factors that help shape social connection are local and community based including public space, housing, schools and our workplaces.⁴²

Belonging is a crucial contrast to loneliness and a key component for maintaining positive mental health. Community-based organisations, particularly those based around sports, arts and other interests, play a key role in young people’s sense of belonging. Additional resourcing and support to build positive cultures in these organisations may enhance their capacity to foster feelings of belonging among young people from many backgrounds.

To address loneliness, both individual and community-based interventions are needed. While individual support sits predominately with health and care providers, we play a large role social infrastructure supporting connection in inclusive and welcoming spaces.

The social infrastructure of a community shapes its social capital. Social infrastructure provides opportunities to foster social connections among residents, local leaders, and community-serving organizations. It includes the physical assets of a community (such as libraries and parks), programs (such as volunteer organizations and member associations), and local policies (such as public transportation and housing) that support the development of social connection.⁴³

We work closely with our communities on how we plan our city and provide essential social infrastructure through our built environment, our leadership and advocacy, programs and significant grants to community-based organisations.

Leadership in inclusion and representation

People that feel healthy, safe and included are better able to participate in employment, education, social and community activities. Continued advocacy is needed as exclusion poses deep risks to our individual and collective wellbeing.

⁴⁰ <https://www.who.int/initiatives/decade-of-healthy-ageing/evidence-gap-map>

⁴¹ <https://www.nswmentalhealthcommission.com.au/sites/default/files/2023-11/Loneliness%20in%20Focus%20Report.pdf>

⁴² <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

⁴³ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

If issues like racism or gender inequality are not confronted, they erode social cohesion and connection, which can fracture society when times get tough. Social, environmental or economic shocks or stressors result in communities breaking down rather than being united and resilient in the face of shared challenges.

Our Wellbeing Survey found that while 89% of respondents appreciate cultural diversity, too many people (45%) say they have faced discrimination in the past 12 months. This is higher for certain communities including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people of diverse sexualities and genders, women, and people with disability. There are also important considerations of intersectionality where our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities had high responses for racism, sexism and ageism.

Leadership is needed through media and communications to increase representation and support a fair and equal community. We have been a strong supporter and advocate for people traditionally marginalised.

We have not only advocated and voiced our support for our diverse community, but we have also invested significantly in programs with the communities impacted. A range of our programs support cultural diversity and strengthen belonging, inclusion and harmony including:

- anti-racism and racial literacy workshops
- Australian sports program, a free series of events engaging new arrivals to the city to learn about Australian culture through sport
- Refugee Week programs and events
- The City is also a [Refugee Welcome Zone](#) and celebrates Refugee Week annually.
- Transgender and gender diverse open days at our recreation centres
- Yabun and NAIDOC events and media

We play an important leadership role in ensuring the city is a welcoming place for international students and supportive of students to become community ambassadors to strengthen engagement between international students and the local community. This is achieved through the City's ISLA program.

We continue to develop a range of targeted welcome programs and initiatives for new residents, including sharing information on local programs, services, community facilities and groups in local neighbourhoods, to help them build community- and place-based connections.

Planning our City

*"The places where we live, work and play, ... can promote meaningful social interactions and help us build a sense of connection. Careful planning and management of these places can create population-wide improvements in loneliness."*⁴⁴

Our local strategic planning statement sets out a 20-year land use vision, balancing the need for housing and economic activities while protecting and enhancing local character, heritage, public places and spaces.

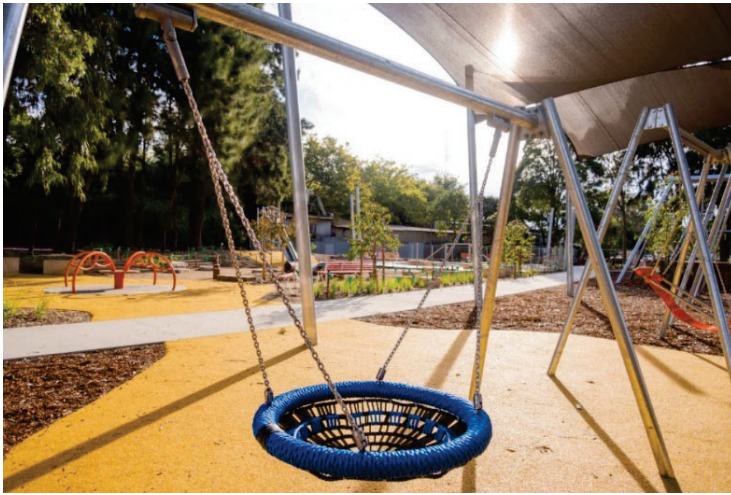
⁴⁴ <https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2023/02/02/the-cities-we-create-lead-to-isolation-and-loneliness.html>

To support liveability, a priority in our local strategic planning statement is for a creative and socially connected city.⁴⁵ It recognises the importance of shared spaces through new development to increase residents' quality of life and reduce isolation.

More than 90% of our community live in high and medium density housing. The design of residential flat buildings can facilitate social interaction through spaces for casual and repeated encounters. The Sydney DCP (4.2.3) has Amenity provisions to ensure that residential amenity is enhanced with landscaping, private and common open space, sun access, ventilation and acoustic privacy. Common space areas are to be provided and the overall design can be used for the recreation and amenity needs of residents.

The design of entrances, transition zones and public spaces can enable social encounters while internal communal spaces can support interaction through multi-purpose spaces and inviting and comfortable shared spaces. For example, the City has recently drafted planning controls for family friendly homes that provide common areas and communal open spaces in apartment buildings to better meet the needs of families with children and facilitate interaction and play.

Since 2018, our leadership on placemaking activities in Green Square have included a series of community events in the Green Square community and cultural precinct and the Green Square Library and Plaza and parks throughout the renewal area. Some of these initiatives include the online community support directory for Green Square residents and the Green Square welcome dinner where community members met in public spaces to share food and stories. They also include Green Square Knitting Group, Green Square Over 60s Club, and the Green Square Neighbour Network.



The Crescent. Photo: Chris Southwood/City of Sydney

Social infrastructure

“Public life can be defined as the undertaking of social activities in the public realm amongst strangers that encourage chance interactions and passive viewing.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ <https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/strategic-land-use-plans/city-plan-2036>

⁴⁶ <https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/research-reports/public-spaces-public-life-studies>

Community facilities are essential for community cohesion. We are committed to investing in new and renewed community facilities in local villages and neighbourhoods. This includes our network of public open spaces, libraries and community centres that support an inclusive and welcoming public life.

Public open spaces

We design our city to support people to connect to each other and place, and public spaces are where connections can be made. We provide public and publicly accessible spaces that are inclusive, good quality, accessible and activated for diverse people and communities and contribute to the social life of the city.⁴⁷

We create connection through the design of our network of walkable streets and public open spaces. Our green spaces and resilience initiatives also aim to reduce exposure to factors that can lead people to self-isolate indoors and become lonely, such as urban heat.⁴⁸

Our 2020 updated Sydney Public Space and Public Life study recognises the City as a meeting place.⁴⁹ The pandemic shone a light on the importance of public space and a sense of urgency to increase the amount of available public space in streets, parks, squares to enable social interaction, a sense of community and belonging. We need more “living rooms”, that is spaces for people to meet and socialise day and night with activities that bring people together and “address social isolation with welcoming public spaces”.

Our green open spaces and street also enable people to reconnect with communities and generate a sense of belonging and connection with the natural world. Adults in neighbourhoods where at least 30% of nearby land has green space have reported 26% lower odds of becoming lonely compared with people in areas with less than 10% green space. A possible explanation is that environments with green space can be important for providing social connection.

Public spaces are at the heart of our communities. We support spaces for people to connect through our network of more 340 parks including Sydney Park and Hyde Park, the small parks upgrade program and innovative laneways programs. We provided new public open spaces, including realising the pedestrianisation of George Street, and new public spaces in Glebe and Annandale (The Crescent lands) and Green Square.

Public spaces are vital in supporting local communities to connect and should be prioritised in state led urban renewal planning as essential infrastructure.

⁴⁷ <https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/strategic-land-use-plans/city-plan-2036>

⁴⁸ Professor Thomas Astell-Burt @ProfAstellBurt www.PowerLab.site

⁴⁹ <https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/research-reports/public-spaces-public-life-studies>



Sydney Park. Photo: City of Sydney/City of Sydney

Community centres

Every community is different, some want more support, others want to deliver community services and initiatives for themselves. That's why we work closely with the community to design and build facilities and co design programs and services that respond to local needs. Services and operating models vary in each centre based on facilities available in the centre and local need.

The City provides facilities to the community in three ways: by operating facilities ourselves, by making facilities available for hire as spaces where communities can gather and connect and providing long term leases to community groups and not for profits such as Tribal Warrior and Counterpoint Community Services through programs like our Accommodation Grants Program.

To increase social connection among diverse communities, we provide services and programs aimed at building social bonds and trust and fostering a sense of belonging. As our population grows, the number and role of our community facilities in supporting quality of life continues to change.

Our community centres offer a range of low and no cost programs, activities, and services to support connection. Centre-based programs support individual independence and social connection with others, with ongoing programs designed to build on existing strengths and abilities.

These include programs designed to engage a broad spectrum of individuals, initiatives tailored for those susceptible to or experiencing social isolation, projects that harness connection in neighbourhoods, programs that challenge racism and build racial literacy, and opportunities to promote intergenerational connections across age demographics.

“Both social and built environments have the potential to positively influence loneliness outcomes. As such, place-based approaches that leverage existing infrastructure, built environment, community networks and services are essential to ensure solutions are fit-for-purpose and meet the needs of communities. In particular, urban planning that prioritises green space, and community group interventions that support meaningful social connection opportunities, have demonstrated positive impacts.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ <https://www.groundswellfoundation.com.au/post/connections-matter-a-report-on-the-impacts-of-loneliness-in-australia>

Our community centres provided innovative programs fostering social networks and a sense of belonging. These include Reggies lunch at the Reginald Murphy Community Centre, regular community barbecues in Glebe and Redfern, walking groups run from various locations every fortnight, hip-hop classes, boxing, journalling, meditation, yoga, gentle exercise, youth gaming and many other and varied activities run across the City's nine Community Centres.



Cliff Noble Community Centre open day. Photo: Abril Felman/City of Sydney

Libraries

“89 per cent of respondents to a survey on the health and wellbeing benefits of libraries said that libraries make a positive contribution to social and cultural connectedness.”⁵¹

Our network offers free, inclusive and welcoming spaces for people to connect free of charge or at low cost. Our libraries are well appreciated by our communities with 71% of respondents satisfied with access, and 88% satisfied with these vital community assets.

Understanding the changing needs of our community allows us to ensure that we deliver and support community and cultural facilities that are welcoming and resilient. Our libraries have evolved from “books on shelves” to centres of creativity, lifelong learning and “community living rooms”, where visitors enjoy quiet contemplation, socialising or access to free technology.⁵²

Our libraries provide digital literacy programs tailored to priority community groups that have high attendance and satisfaction by attendees. We facilitate community members’ access to affordable digital technology and equipment, access to education, training, and lifelong opportunities, and through other initiatives to counter digital exclusion amongst our community. Target groups for the City’s digital literacy and inclusion programming includes older people, people on lower incomes and people with disability.

⁵¹ https://sgsep.com.au/assets/main/SGS-Economics-and-Planning_The-Health-and-Wellbeing-Benefits-of-Public-Libraries-Across-Victoria.pdf

⁵² <https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/strategic-land-use-plans/city-plan-2036>

Recreational spaces

Our recreation facilities are at the heart of fostering vibrant community connections, offering both formal and informal opportunities for community members to build healthy, active, and connected lifestyles. These facilities serve as a vital platform for our residents to come together, using passive and active recreation as powerful vehicles to build meaningful relationships, strengthen community bonds, and cultivate a deep sense of belonging.

With a network of six aquatic and fitness centres—many featuring state-of-the-art facilities—alongside a variety of outdoor and indoor courts, including tennis centres, we provide an extensive range of programs, services, and bookable spaces designed to cater to diverse needs and interests.

Iconic facilities such as Perry Park Recreation Centre, Rushcutters Bay and Prince Alfred Park Tennis Centre, and King George V (KGV) Recreation Centre further elevate our offerings, providing well-resourced and staffed facilities for recreation and community connection.

We are committed to offering low-cost and affordable programming, alongside free "come and try" programs like open days and special activations for various groups within the community. Programs such as the Seniors Festival and Trans and Gender Diverse Community Activations provide unique opportunities for inclusion and participation in recreational activities. These targeted programs bridge gaps in inclusion and combat social isolation, ensuring our recreation facilities are accessible to all.

Additionally, our access card and concession pricing provide further support by offering financially subsidised access to these facilities for our most vulnerable community members.

Beyond structured programs, offer both bookable and informal spaces that encourage spontaneous and organised recreational activities. From outdoor courts and exercise equipment to scenic walking trails, open spaces, parklands, natural turf, and all-weather fields our facilities are thoughtfully designed to foster recreation, relaxation, and connection with community. We also actively collaborate with local sporting groups and associations to enhance these opportunities, ensuring that every member of the community has a place to stay active, healthy, and connected.



KGV sports and classes. Photo: Chris Southwood/City of Sydney

Additional programs

The City has invested significantly in both the spaces needed and their ongoing programming to support community connection and reduce loneliness and social isolation.

Free place-based events

We promote and support the delivery of cultural and creative programs and initiatives that enhance the quality and identity of local neighbourhoods and build connections between people and to their neighbourhoods.

Our major events and festivals program aims to be welcoming and inclusive for everyone. For example, the Sydney Lunar Festival involves diverse communities including Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese and Thai. Sydney New Year's Eve attracts many interstate and international visitors with materials translated into multiple languages and initiatives to ensure the event is accessible for people with disability.

We promote and support local community arts projects that enhance connections to and understanding of place. Since 2022 the Sydney Lunar Festival has shifted focus from Circular Quay to the Haymarket area, to help enliven the area following the Covid-19 pandemic. This has resulted in the festival increasing its engagement of local community organisations and enhancing connections to the local community.

We support and deliver arts initiatives in local neighbourhoods that reflect the lived experiences of communities, including Mardi Gras and Yabun festivals. Cultural and creative activations of local neighbourhoods, including the current Sydney Streets program allowing local businesses and organisations to activate the street with pop-up dining, retail and engagement activities. The program also provides opportunities to employ local performers as part of a program of roving and pop-up entertainment throughout the day.

Volunteer programs

“While there is still limited evidence about the types of strategies that are effective in reducing loneliness, it has been consistently found that providing opportunities for engagement in meaningful, rewarding activities in a group environment is beneficial.”⁵³

We also offer a range of volunteer opportunities and support volunteer organisations through our financial and accommodation grants. Engaging in volunteer work and maintaining active memberships of sporting or community organisations are also associated with reduced social isolation.⁵⁴

Volunteering plays an important role in creating connections within community and provides opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds to come together and share experiences. Working with people from diverse backgrounds can also support empathy and understanding of each other. This not only breaks down barriers, but also promotes acceptance and contributes to social cohesion.

Opportunities to volunteer and help each other is also important in a time of crisis. Finding ways to strengthen social cohesion within the community is an ongoing challenge, however,

⁵³ <https://endingloneliness.com.au/lets-talk-loneliness-and-communities/>

⁵⁴ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/mental-health/topic-areas/social-isolation-and-loneliness>

opportunities to volunteer provides a platform for people to build trust and networks across different community groups.

Our volunteer programs include Sydney City Farm, Sydney ambassadors, international student leaders and ambassadors, Sydney New Year's Eve and ongoing programs like Meals on Wheels. We support volunteer youth leadership through our Youth Opportunities Program and Emerging civic Leaders Program. We provided support for our 23 community gardens, and programming across our 30 community centres which provide opportunities for social connection, learning and wellbeing.

Companion animals

Pets can play an integral part in people's lives, that can bring both physical and mental health benefits and contribute to reducing social isolation and feelings of loneliness.

Multiple studies have found an association between pet ownership and lower experiences of social isolation, by increasing their sense of purpose and meaning, facilitating increased social interaction, reducing loneliness and improving emotional resilience. Owning a pet increases the opportunity for people to get to know their neighbours and for social interactions and forming friendships.⁵⁵

We have long advocated for pet owners and the importance of pets in apartments, in our parks and on public transport to support our community. We support the recent announcements on changes to allow pet ownership in rentals.

Recommendations

Recommendation 10: The NSW Government recognise that the City is best placed to plan for community infrastructure and establish adequate funding for local government to provide and manage community infrastructure and services that connect people and:

- i. collaborate with us on the provision of social infrastructure when planning and developing state significant precincts.
- ii. strengthen Policy and Legislation to ensure social and recreational facilities are a standard requirement in state led development approvals where appropriate, integrating them into urban and suburban projects to promote community wellbeing.
- iii. Increase funding to enhance the amount and quality of public open spaces and their management and maintenance to support social connectedness in an increasingly dense urban environment.
- iv. increased funding for the renewal and construction of recreational facilities through programs like the Greater Cities Sport Facility Fund, prioritising growth areas and regional centres.
- v. strengthen consultation on state-led recreational projects by using local councils proactively to engage communities, ensuring facilities reflect local needs, as seen with Gunyama Park Aquatic Centre.

⁵⁵ ibid

Recommendation 11: The NSW Government develop more specific design guidance for communal and public spaces, including quantum of space and other measurable criteria, to support social interaction in high density communities.

Recommendation 12: The NSW Government should maintain support for Get Active NSW and the Healthy Communities Program, expanding these initiatives to focus on socially isolated groups.

The workplace as a connector

We value that the workplace offers rich opportunities for social connection. The US Surgeon General's "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation" report suggests leaders in workplaces can make small changes to existing workplace policies, training and supports to include the importance of social connection.

The City of Sydney has been recognised as an Inclusive Employer by the Diversity Council Australia. An inclusive workplace is defined as one where diverse people are respected, connected, and can progress and contribute to organisational success.

A key part of the way we have supported people from diverse backgrounds is through the creation, expansion and promotion of our Employee Network Groups (ENGs), including:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employee Network
- City Pride
- City Women
- DiverseCity
- Young Professionals Network, and
- Disability Employment Network.

We recognise ENGs play a crucial role in reducing feelings of loneliness by providing opportunities for connection and support providing support to help address loneliness through:

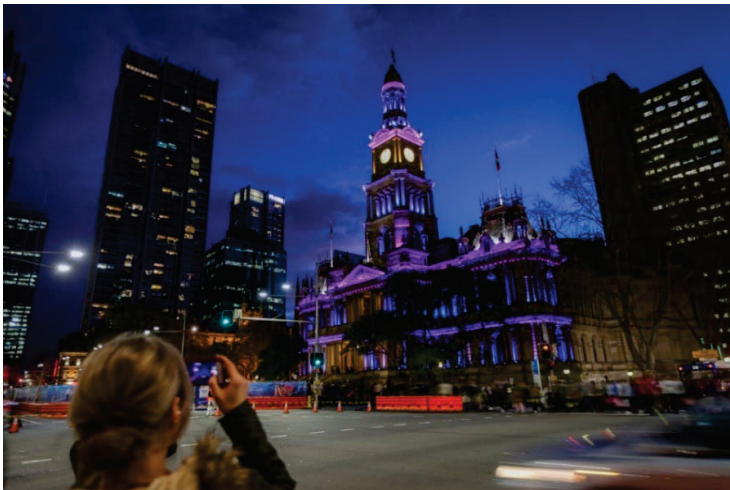
- Creating a sense of belonging: bringing together employees with shared interests, backgrounds, or experiences, fostering a community and belonging.
- Purpose and engagement: opportunities to engage in meaningful activities and advocacy to foster a sense of purpose and shared goals.
- Peer support: provide a supportive environment where members are able to connect with others who understand their unique challenges due to shared lived experiences, supporting an environment of understanding.
- Building social connections: Through activities such as social events, lunch and learns, and discussion groups, where members can meet and form connections.

Provided below are examples of some recent initiatives which were designed to create social connection and raise awareness about particular topics relating to inclusion.

- Wear it purple (25 August 2023): 100 employees attended City Pride's Wear It Purple afternoon tea. Wear it purple strives to raise awareness of how we can foster a supportive, safe and inclusive environment for rainbow young people.

- Inclusion at work week (6 - 10 November 2023): Celebrated by all the employee networks. Each event had attendance of hundred plus employees, showcasing achievements and future goals.
- International day for people with disability (29 November 2023): The event was designed to deepen understanding of the barriers and challenges faced by people with non-visible disabilities. Disability leadership, invisibility, intersectionality and allyship were topics discussed in detail by a keynote speaker and an expert panel.
- International day for the elimination of racial discrimination (21 March 2024): Media and social events were held to raise awareness.
- International day against homophobia, biphobia and transphobia (17 May 2024): The event was designed to raise awareness of inclusion barriers and challenges faced by Trans and Bi+ communities. Guest speakers from Qtopia shared their experiences as members of Trans and Bi+ communities.

Recommendation 13: The NSW Government continue, and consider expanding, it's programs and initiatives to support connection across its workforce, with a focus on groups most at risk of loneliness and social isolation.



Town Hall Sydney lights up purple in support of Wear it Purple Day. Photo: Katherine Griffiths/City of Sydney

1.1 Concluding remarks (terms of reference i and j)

“The level of social connection is shaped by a multitude of elements, encompassing both physical and social surroundings. The urban layout, architectural design of buildings and parks, accessibility of public transportation as well as the presence of volunteer groups and social programs significantly influence our capacity to engage socially within the community. It is imperative that government departments, organisations and communities work together to guarantee that newly built infrastructure promotes social bonds and connection.”⁵⁶

Much of the meaningful work to foster social connections and tackle loneliness is going to need to take place at the community level in organisations that have existing infrastructure, relationships, and expertise. ⁵⁷

A collaborative focussed and resourced effort is needed across community, business and all levels of government to both reinforce the importance of social connectedness and provide individual, family and community level support to reduce loneliness.

We would welcome more in-depth discussions to share our extensive expertise in this area and to encourage more holistic, community led, place-based approaches that are adequately resourced.

If you wish to speak to a Council officer about this letter, please contact Vanessa Gordon, Manager Social Strategy on email

⁵⁶ <https://www.nswmentalhealthcommission.com.au/sites/default/files/2023-11/Loneliness%20in%20Focus%20Report.pdf>

⁵⁷ <https://endingloneliness.com.au/lets-talk-loneliness-and-communities/>