INQUIRY INTO PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF LONELINESS IN NEW SOUTH WALES
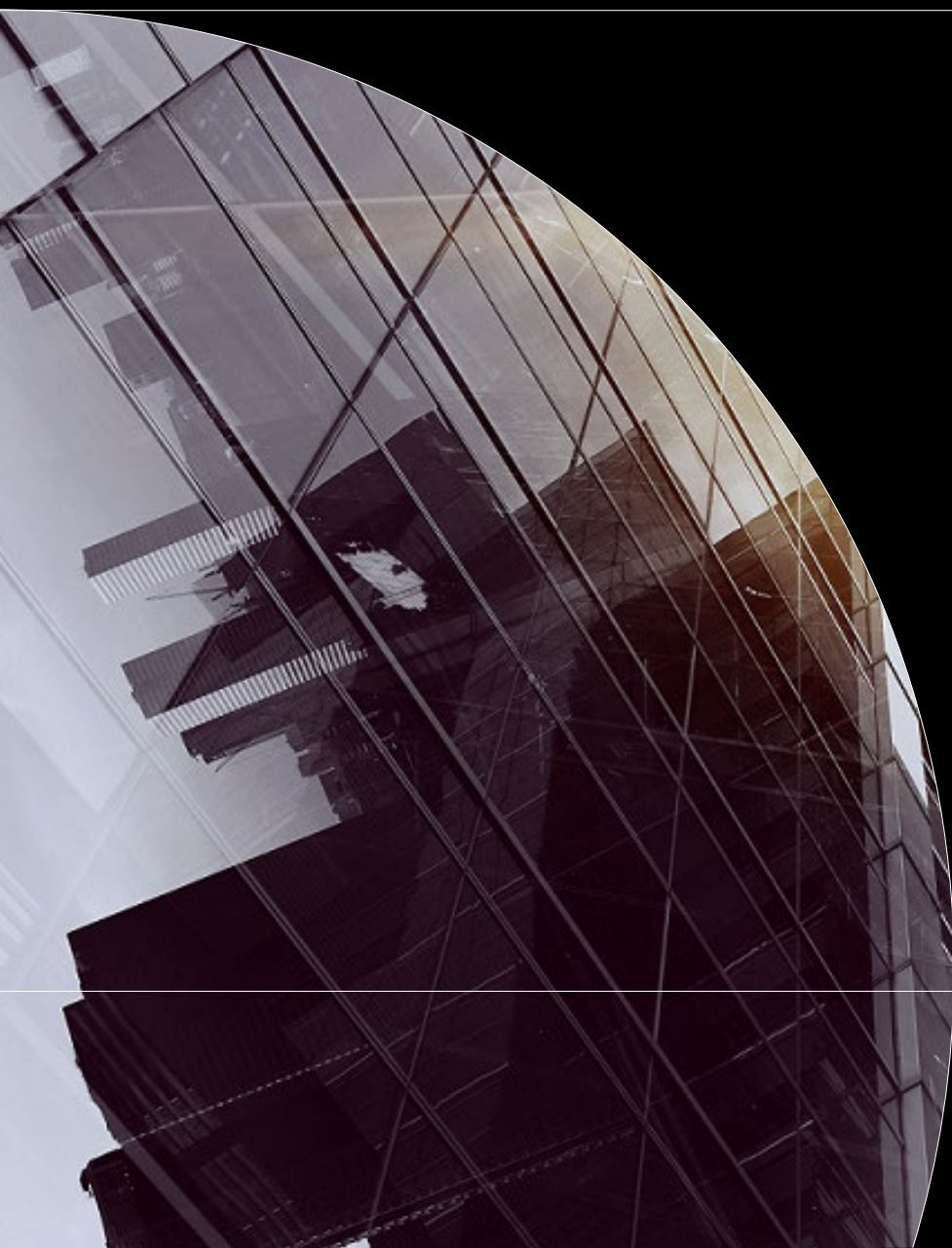
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Prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales

BCA Submission

November 2024

BCA

Business Council of Australia

Contents

1.   Overview

The Business Council of Australia (BCA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Standing Committee on Social Issues regarding the *Prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales*.

The BCA represents over 130 of Australia's leading businesses, together employing over 1.1 million people, including in aged care, private health insurance, hospitals and pharmaceuticals. We support a stronger Australia that is competitive, productive, fair and inclusive, which fosters an economy that enhances economic participation for all Australians. This will support Australia's national prosperity – now and for future generations.

Loneliness has both an economic and social impact. Evidence suggests loneliness impacts one in four Australians, with broader health care costs estimated at $2.7 billion per annum.[1] It is widely recognised this is an increasing public health issue. But this issue must also be seen more broadly as it also has economic, social and cultural ramifications affecting individuals, communities and the economy.

There are many factors which appear to be increasing the prevalence of loneliness. COVID-19 exacerbated the problem as people were forced to be separated for sustained periods. In addition, an increase in the uptake of flexible working arrangements, including working from home, is reducing the direct connections people have traditionally fostered within the workplace. Other factors include the increased use of digital technology and an ageing population in Australia, with many people now living alone.

All stakeholders, including government, business and the community, have an important role to play to address the issue of loneliness, and in some cases, to make the necessary investment to reduce its prevalence.

Governments across the world are recognising this issue and have started to address it through a range of measures. A multi-faceted approach is required as it is a complex issue with different contributing factors and different groups or people to reach. There are certain populations more at risk, including older adults, First Nations people, people with disability and carers. Proposed measures need to specifically consider these populations.

Although governments are turning their attention to this public health issue, there is limited evidence to date on the effectiveness of interventions. This means, that while the New South Wales (NSW) Government should be learning from the experiences of other jurisdictions, there is a need for the Government to drive its own initiatives.

The BCA encourages the NSW Government to ensure the issues of loneliness and social isolation are at the forefront of policy development. The approach should be founded on the following principles:

- Clearly defining loneliness, social isolation and social connection, recognising they are unique concepts.
- Establishing initiatives specific to at-risk groups, acknowledging that a one-size-fits-all approach will not be the solution.
- Ensuring populations at risk are specifically considered during the development and implementation of the policies across government.
- Seeking commitment to a whole-of-society partnership between government, business and community.
- Driving cross-government co-ordination and prioritisation from federal, state and territory, and local governments.
- Fostering a cross-sectoral approach across health, social, economic and cultural sectors to prevent or limit the various causes of loneliness.

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[1] Duncan A, Kiely D, Mavisakalyan A, Peters A, Seymour R, Twomey C, Vu L. 2021. Stronger Together: Loneliness and social connectedness in Australia, *Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre Focus on the States Series*, No. 8, pp. 13, 96.

"Together, we can build a country that's healthier, more resilient, less lonely, and more connected."[2]
Dr Vivek Murthy, United States Surgeon General

2.   Key recommendations

The BCA proposes the following recommendations and actions for the NSW Government:

Recommendation 1 – Work with researchers, policy makers, the community and business to agree on definitions of loneliness, social isolation and social connection.

Recommendation 2 – Put loneliness on the National Cabinet agenda, to prioritise loneliness as a policy area, seek agreement on the national definition and approach, and identify a lead organisation for the collection of relevant data, such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics or the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Recommendation 3 – Determine the population groups at most risk and ensure these groups are considered during the development and implementation of policies and measures, underpinned by co-design principles.

Recommendation 4 – Review international and Australian data and research to learn from other jurisdictions, identify best practice data collection practices and identify any research gaps.

Recommendation 5 – Collect consistent data to determine the prevalence of loneliness and its economic costs. This data could be included in a wellbeing report.

Recommendation 6 – Develop a coordinated strategy involving governments, business, community, researchers and other key stakeholders. The strategy should include:

- the agreed definitions of loneliness, social isolation and social connection to ensure there is a consistent approach, including a data collection process and standardised data

- identification and analysis of those at most risk, to enable the policy responses to be effectively targeted

- a formal review of action undertaken in other jurisdictions to identify gaps and best practice

- recommendations on a framework to embed the issue in policy development across government

- a one-policy approach which considers the health, economic, social, cultural and environment factors surrounding the issue

- the Minister for Families and Communities to be the lead co-ordinating minister through the Department of Communities and Justice

- an emphasis on prevention and early intervention.

Recommendation 7 – Pilot new initiatives to assess their effectiveness, particularly for target groups, and scale up those that are proven to be effective.

Recommendation 8 – Support business initiatives which address loneliness, including community partnerships and engagement with community organisations.

Recommendation 9 – Create a public awareness campaign and education about the prevalence and consequences of loneliness, to de-stigmatise the issue and encourage people to access services and support.

Recommendation 10 – Roll out appropriate education and training for frontline services, particularly those in mental health, health care professionals and community services to identify and support people impacted by loneliness.

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[2] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. New Surgeon General Advisory Raises Alarm about the Devastating Impact of the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in the United States.

Recommendation 11 – Work with the Federal Government and health professionals on the development of guidance for referring people experiencing loneliness to services to increase their social connectedness. This could form part of a national social prescribing pilot.

Recommendation 12 – Collaborate with community organisations and business to input into urban design plans which consider facilitating social connection.

Recommendation 13 – Strengthen existing health, social, education, and community infrastructure and services to provide tailored support and increased access to those at risk of, or who are currently experiencing, loneliness.

Recommendation 14 – Business to work together to raise awareness of loneliness in the workplace and develop a voluntary framework for addressing the issue with their workforce.

Recommendation 15 – Recognise and encourage business initiatives which support local community groups, such as sporting or cultural groups, to enable people to connect to foster greater community engagement.

3.   The concepts of loneliness, social isolation and social connection

Currently, there are no universally accepted definitions of loneliness, social isolation and social connection; there is also no agreed definition in Australia.[3]

Loneliness is typically associated with social isolation. However, it is important to recognise loneliness and social isolation are different, but related concepts.[4] The two concepts may, but do not necessarily coexist.[5]

Social connection is the opposite of loneliness.[6]

A recent review of national policies addressing loneliness and social isolation found Peplau and Perlman's (1982) framework is most commonly referenced when defining the two concepts.[7]

- Loneliness: A subjective feeling because of social isolation
- Social Isolation: An objective lack of social relationships
- Social Connection: A subjective feeling because of connections to others.

Loneliness is not the same as being alone.[8] An individual can spend time alone and not feel lonely or socially isolated.[9] An individual can also be socially connected and surround by familiar people, but still feel lonely.[10] If an individual feels lonely, they are likely to be lonely.

Therefore, it is important to distinguish between these concepts, to ensure appropriate policies are implemented and impactful actions are taken.

Refer to Appendix 8.1: Concepts of loneliness, social isolation and social connection for further information.

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[3] What Works Wellbeing. 2019. A brief guide to measuring loneliness for charities and social enterprises, p. 9.
[4] National Institute on Aging. 2024. Loneliness and Social Isolation – Tips for Staying Connected.
[5] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2024. Social isolation and loneliness.
[6] Seppala E. 2024. Connectedness & Health: The Science of Social Connection. *The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education, Standford Medicine.*
[7] Campaign to End Loneliness. 2024. Facts and statistics about loneliness; Goldman N, Khanna D, El Asmar M, Qualter P, El-Osta A. 2024. Addressing loneliness and social isolation in 52 countries: a scoping review of National policies. *BMC Public Health*, 24(1), p. 9.
[8] Ending Loneliness Together in Australia. 2020. Ending Loneliness Together in Australia White Paper, p. 11; Lifeline Support Toolkit. Loneliness – what is loneliness?.
[9] Lifeline Support Toolkit. Loneliness – what is loneliness?; National Institute on Aging. 2024. Loneliness and Social Isolation – Tips for Staying Connected.
[10] Lifeline Support Toolkit. Loneliness – what is loneliness?; National Institute on Aging. 2024. Loneliness and Social Isolation – Tips for Staying Connected.

3.1   The link between loneliness and mental health

Loneliness is not an isolated mental health condition.[11] This is an important point as it is key to how the issue is addressed and the requisite interventions. Evidence demonstrates social connections are fundamental to the wellbeing of individuals.[12] Therefore, loneliness can impact an individual's mental health in two specific ways:[13]

- Mental health problems can cause loneliness, such as social anxiety, making it harder to connect with others

- Extended periods of loneliness can develop into depression and other mental health conditions, such as stress, anxiety and sleep problems.

In NSW, 54 per cent of people with a lived experience of mental health issues were almost twice as likely to report being lonely compared to those who did not self-report that they experienced a mental health issue (32 per cent).[14] Similar findings were found in the Netherlands, with a strong correlation between high loneliness scores and experiencing major depressive disorders.[15]

Furthermore, young adults between 18-29 reported the highest rates of loneliness, with 58 per cent measuring between 6-9 on the UCLA 3-item scale, and 55 per cent of those aged 40-49 years.[16] The Headspace National Mental Health Survey had similar findings, with over half of young Australians reporting feeling lonely.[17]

Recommendation 1 – Work with researchers, policy makers, the community and business to agree on definitions of loneliness, social isolation and social connection.

Recommendation 2 – Put loneliness on the National Cabinet agenda, to prioritise loneliness as a policy area, seek agreement on the national definition and approach, and identify a lead organisation for the collection of relevant data such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics or the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

4.   Identification of populations most at risk of loneliness and social isolation

The literature and recent studies demonstrate loneliness and social isolation may impact some groups of the population more than others. For this reason, a one-size-fits-all approach will not succeed. Tailored approaches with a key focus on the groups most at risk, particularly different age groups, is essential.

Importantly, measures will be most effective if they are co-designed with the groups they are seeking to target.[18] Working with impacted groups ensures programs can be effectively implemented and appreciate the particular needs and issues confronting those key groups.

Groups which should be a priority for specific policy measures include:[19]

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[11] Campaign to End Loneliness. 2024. Facts and statistics about loneliness; Lifeline Support Toolkit. Loneliness; Mind. 2024. About loneliness.
[12] Lifeline Support Toolkit. Loneliness; U.S Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2024. Social Connection.
[13] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2024. Social isolation and loneliness; Lifeline Support Toolkit. Loneliness.
[14] Mental Health Commission of New South Wales. 2023. Loneliness in Focus. An Insights Report, p. 8.
[15] Mental Health Commission of New South Wales. 2023. Loneliness in Focus. An Insights Report, p. 8; Steen O, Ori A, Wardenaar K, Loo H. 2022. Loneliness associates strongly with anxiety and depression during the COVID pandemic, especially in men and younger adults. *Scientific Reports*, 12(1).
[16] Mental Health Commission of New South Wales. 2023. Loneliness in Focus. An Insights Report, p. 9.
[17] Headspace. 2020. Insights: loneliness over time – headspace National Youth Mental Health Survey 2020.
[18] Consumer Health Forum. 2021. Loneliness Thought Leadership Roundtable Report – Roadmap for addressing loneliness in Australia, p. 6.
[19] Campaign to End Loneliness. 2024. Facts and statistics about loneliness; Duncan A, Kiely D, Mavisakalyan A, Peters A, Seymour R, Twomey C, Vu L. 2021. Stronger Together: Loneliness and social connectedness in Australia, *Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre Focus on the States Series*, No. 8; Groundswell Foundation. 2022. Connections Matter – A report on the impacts of loneliness in Australia, pp. 12-15; Lifeline Support Toolkit. Loneliness – causes of loneliness; U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Health Effects of Social Isolation and Loneliness; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, p. 19.

- Low-income / socio-economic groups

- Young adults

- Older adults (aged 65 and older)

- Single-person households

- First Nations People

- Carers

- Regional, rural and remote populations

- Minority groups, including migrants (language barriers)

- People with disability (physical and non-physical)

- People who identify as LGBTQ+

- People with a mental health condition.

It is also important to identify the range of risk factors which can contribute to loneliness, including health, social and cultural factors. If we are to take a preventative approach, then it is essential that policies address relevant risk factors early to mitigate the risk of loneliness developing into a chronic condition. Studies demonstrate prolonged loneliness can be a risk factor for poorer mental health outcomes.[20]

By addressing these factors, we mitigate the risk of transient loneliness becoming an ongoing pattern of behaviour, which has longer term negative health and economic consequences for individuals and the broader community. However, it can be difficult to identify effective interventions, when the triggers can be very diverse as they are specific to individual circumstances.

From a policy perspective, the most effective response is a principles-based approach across government to implement a range of measures which address social connectedness to bring people together. As an example, becoming a new parent can be a trigger. Services for new parents should consider how to bring families together, such as new parents' programs and training for health care workers to identify if a family is isolated, and if so, to connect the family to services in the community. Another example is the successful Men's Sheds program, which is designed to support men who have retired to connect with others to avoid isolation and loneliness, which can lead to more serious mental health issues.

Recommendation 3 – Determine the population groups at most risk and ensure these groups are considered during the development and implementation of policies and measures, underpinned by co-design principles.

5. Impact and Prevalence of loneliness

One of the most significant impacts of loneliness and social isolation is the negative physical and mental health impact on the individual.[21] This is supported by analysis from the World Health Organization which suggests the health impacts of loneliness can be comparable to smoking, excessive drinking and obesity.[22] Both are

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[20] Wolska K, Creaven A. 2023. Associations between transient and chronic loneliness, and depression, in the understanding society study. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology,* 62(1).

[21] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2024. Social isolation and loneliness; Campaign to End Loneliness. 2024. Facts and statistics about loneliness; Duncan A, Kiely D, Mavisakalyan A, Peters A, Seymour R, Twomey C, Vu L. 2021. Stronger Together: Loneliness and social connectedness in Australia, *Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre Focus on the States Series,* No. 8, pp. 16-22; Groundswell Foundation. 2022. Connections Matter – A report on the impacts of loneliness in Australia, pp. 9-11; National Institute on Aging. 2024. Loneliness and Social Isolation – Tips for Staying Connected.

[22] Groundswell Foundation. 2022. Connections Matter – A report on the impacts of loneliness in Australia, pp. 9-11; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, pp. 4, 8; World Health Organization. 2023. Social isolation and loneliness have serious health consequences.

widespread, painful, and harmful to an individual's health, affecting people of all ages. Recent statistics demonstrate loneliness contributes to: [23]

- A 25 per cent increase in risk of early death

- Up to a 50 per cent increase in risk of developing dementia

- Up to a 30 per cent increase in risk of stroke or cardiovascular disease

- A person being more likely to be admitted to the emergency department or aged care facilities

- Other issues including poor-quality sleep, low energy, poor diet, negative feelings, and substance abuse.

By addressing loneliness and social isolation, an individual's physical and mental health outcomes should improve.[24] In addition, there should be associated economic benefits through reduced health and care costs (less individuals present at hospitals or enter aged care), increased economic participation and productivity.[25]

Other social benefits include improvement to quality of life.[26] It is clear loneliness and social isolation are closely aligned with the social determinants of health (education, employment), and a multi-faceted approach needs to be considered.

5.1   International data

International evidence confirms that the rates of loneliness are significant. The data also confirms the range of factors which contribute to loneliness and the different groups where the prevalence is higher. The international experience is a valuable guide and reference for Australian policy makers in confirming the scale of the issue and the need for targeted approaches relevant to each group.

- An estimated 1 in 4 older people experience social isolation and loneliness[27]

- Between 2015 and 2050, the proportion of the world's population over 60 years old will nearly double from 12 per cent to 22 per cent[28]

- 20-34 per cent of older people are lonely in China, Europe, Latin America and the United States[29]

- 5-15 per cent of adolescents experience loneliness (12.7 per cent in Africa, 5.3 per cent in Europe).[30]

5.2   Japan

The ageing population in Japan is increasing the number of people who are isolated at home. In 2022, a government survey revealed that 40 per cent of respondents in the country aged 16 years and older felt lonely.[31] This year, the Japanese Police Force expect some 60,000 people (compared to 27,000 in 2011) to die alone and

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[23] Healthdirect. 2024. Loneliness and isolation; Lifeline Support Toolkit. Loneliness – Feelings and effects of loneliness; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, p 28; World Health Organization. 2023. Loneliness and social isolation are health risks.
[24] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2024. Social isolation and loneliness.
[25] Engel L, Mihalopoulos C. 2024. The loneliness epidemic: a holistic view of its health and economic implications in older age. *The Medical Journal of Australia;* Groundswell Foundation. 2022. Connections Matter – A report on the impacts of loneliness in Australia, p. 22; UK Government. 2018. A connected society – A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change, p. 19.
[26] Groundswell Foundation. 2022. Connections Matter – A report on the impacts of loneliness in Australia, p. 22.
[27] World Health Organization. Social Isolation and Loneliness.
[28] World Health Organization. 2024. Ageing and health.
[29] World Health Organization. 2021. Social isolation and loneliness among older people, p. 1.
[30] Surkalim D, Luo M, Eres R, Gebel K, van Buskirk J, Bauman A, Ding D. 2022. The prevalence of loneliness across 113 countries: systematic review and meta-analysis. *British Medical Journal,* 376; World Health Organization. Social isolation and loneliness; World Health Organization. WHO Commission on Social Connection.
[31] The Yomiuri Shimbun. 2024. 40% of People in Japan Feel Lonely, Survey Says. *The Japan News;* Yoshida K. 2024. Understanding and addressing patient loneliness in Japan and the World. *Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.*

unnoticed.[32] Unfortunately, that forecast is already being evidenced in the first three months of 2024, as 22,000 people were reported to have died at home alone, with 80 per cent of them aged 65 or older.[33]

5.3   United Kingdom

The United Kingdom (UK) has undertaken a significant review of loneliness through the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness. The report provides important insights into the groups of people who may be at higher risk of loneliness and social isolation. The report found that in the UK:[34]

- Over nine million adults are often or always lonely

- 50 per cent of people with disability will be lonely on any given day

- 52 per cent of parents have experienced loneliness

- 58 per cent of migrants and refugees in London described loneliness and isolation as their biggest challenge

- Eight out of 10 carers have felt lonely or isolated when looking after a loved one

- More than one in 10 men say they are lonely, but would not admit it to anyone

- More than one in three people aged 75 and over say their feeling of loneliness is out of their control.

5.4   United States

In the United States (US), the data highlights a significant connection between the rate of social connection and an increased prevalence of disease. The US Surgeon General reported:[35]

- One in two US adults report experiencing loneliness, with some of the highest rates among young adults

- Only 39 per cent of adults in the US said they felt connected to others

- Loneliness and social isolation increase the risk of mortality by 26 per cent and 29 per cent respectively

- Insufficient social connection is associated with a:
    – 29 per cent increased risk of heart disease
    – 32 per cent increased risk of stroke
    – 50 per cent increase of developing dementia for older adults.

5.5   Economic impact in other jurisdictions

The health impact of loneliness and a lack of social connection are high for the individual and their personal health as evidenced by the data. But this also flows through to the cost of running the health system. Poor health requires more health interventions, which drives up the overall cost to both the individual and the government paying for these services. For business, there is a direct cost of employees not being able to work to the best of their abilities if they are suffering from other health conditions. Loss of productivity, less motivated staff and increased absences due to sick leave, all have an impact on a business's operations.

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[32] McCurry J. 2024. Life at the heat of Japan's lonely deaths epidemic: 'I would be lying if I said I wasn't worried'. *The Guardian*.
[33] McCurry J. 2024. Life at the heat of Japan's lonely deaths epidemic: 'I would be lying if I said I wasn't worried'. *The Guardian*.
[34] Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness. 2017. Combatting loneliness one conversation at a time: A call to action, pp 8-11.
[35] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, pp. 8-9.

Broader impacts on an individual include social and economic factors which also have a wider consequence for business and the community: [36]

- Lower academic achievement

- Lower performance at work

- Decreased productivity and engagement

- Reduced ability to perform daily activities, such as driving and cooking.

The UK's Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness brought this to the fore in their report, highlighting the economic imperative to address loneliness and social isolation, not only as a health issue but also as an economic issue. [37]

- Loneliness costs UK employers 2.5 billion pounds per year

- Disconnected communities cost the UK economy 32 billion pounds every year

- One pound invested in tackling loneliness saves society 1.26 pounds.

Similarly, data from the US supports the need to address the health and economic costs. [38]

- Social isolation among older adults accounts for an estimated $6.7 billion in excess Medicare spending annually, largely due to increased hospital and nursing facility spending

- Stress-related absenteeism attributed to loneliness costs employers an estimated $154 billion annually.

5.6 Australian data

More than five million Australians are lonely at any one time. This is a staggering figure and confirms the scale of the problem and the impact it is having on the lives of these individuals and the broader community.

The 2018 Australian Loneliness Report by the Australian Psychological Society in collaboration with Swinburne University found that: [39]

- One in four Australian adults are lonely

- One in two Australians feel lonely for at least one day in a week, while one in four feel lonely for three or more days

- Nearly 55 per cent of the population feels they lack companionship at least sometimes.

These figures are similar to those from organisations such as Lifeline[40] and the Groundswell Foundation,[41] which have been established to address the impact of loneliness on mental health, and reported:

- 37 per cent of young people are lonely

- 26 per cent increased risk of death for lonely people

- 54 per cent of Australians feel lonelier after the COVID-19 pandemic.

A recent study by the Black Dog Institute found over 50 per cent of people reported feeling lonely during the pandemic.[42] Clearly, this was a significant disruption to the previous patterns of social connection and is still

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[36] Groundswell Foundation. 2022. Connections Matter – A report on the impacts of loneliness in Australia, p. 9; National Institute on Ageing. 2024. Understanding Loneliness and Social Isolation – How to Stay Connected; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, p. 9.

[37] Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness. 2017. Combatting loneliness one conversation at a time: A call to action, pp 8-11.

[38] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, p.9.

[39] Australian Psychological Society. 2018. Australian Loneliness Report – A survey exploring the loneliness levels of Australians and the impact on their health and wellbeing, p. 5.

[40] Lifeline Support Toolkit. Loneliness. What is loneliness?.

[41] Groundswell Foundation. 2022. Connections Matter – A report on the impacts of loneliness in Australia, p. 5.

[42] Black Dog Institute. What is loneliness and how can we overcome it?.

having an impact. It is an important development which will require further and ongoing data gathering to identify the long-term impact.

A more recent survey from the Ending Loneliness Together Campaign has revealed one in three Australians feel lonely at any given time, with one in four Australians experiencing persistent loneliness.[43]

Understanding the differences between the levels of male and female loneliness and what is causing these will also be important. Interestingly, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found that there is a slightly higher rate of loneliness amongst males than females, and a more detailed understanding as to why this is occurring is required.[44]

- One in five (17 per cent) males and one in six (15 per cent) females aged 15-24 are experiencing loneliness
- Almost one in seven (15 per cent) of Australians (18 per cent males, 12 per cent females) are experiencing social isolation.

The increase of loneliness amongst young people is a major concern. The Headspace National Youth Mental Health Survey found an increase in the number of young people reporting feelings of loneliness between 2018 and 2020:[45]

- 54 per cent of young people now report experiencing a lack of companionship (up from 49 per cent)
- 53 per cent of those aged 12-14 felt they lacked companionship (up from 41 per cent)
- 47 per cent of young people feel left out often or some of the time (up from 44 per cent)
- 40 per cent of young women aged 12-14 years felt isolated from others (up from 27 per cent).

5.6.1 Australian Capital Territory

The Health Research Institute (HRI) at the University of Canberra has been collecting and analysing data in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) since 2019.[46] HRI data provided to an ACT Parliamentary Committee confirms the higher rates among particular groups, including:[47]

- 18.7 per cent of the LGBTQIA+ community reported higher rates of loneliness than the ACT average
- 18.9 per cent of carers with high levels of loneliness (often lonely), noting that 'informal carers who have 15 hours a week or more of caring obligations' are particularly impacted.

The ACT Wellbeing Data Dashboard indicates just 15.1 per cent of those aged 18–29 years experienced a high level of social connection, and 13.6 per cent reported they were often lonely.[48]

5.6.2 New South Wales

In NSW, the Community Wellbeing Survey undertaken by the Mental Health Commission of NSW in 2022 provides specific insights into an increase in mental health issues post the pandemic and a correlating increase in loneliness for those reporting a mental health issue. This data is important, as while loneliness is not a mental health issue, there is a connection and policies must respond accordingly. The Survey found:[49]

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[43] Ending Loneliness Together. 2024. Why we feel lonely. A deep dive into how different life circumstances contribute to persistent loneliness and social isolation, p.6.

[44] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2024. Social isolation and loneliness.

[45] Headspace. 2020. Insights: Loneliness over time: Headspace National Youth Mental Health Survey 2020, pp. 3-6.

[46] ACT Government. Personal Wellbeing.

[47] ACT Government. Sense of social connection; Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory. Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion. 2024. Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT, p. 10.

[48] ACT Government. Sense of social connection; Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory. Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion. 2024. Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT, p. 9.

[49] Mental Health Commission of New South Wales. 2023. Loneliness in Focus. An Insights Report, p. 8.

- Almost half of NSW residents reported experiencing feelings related to loneliness 'some of the time' or 'often' as measured by the UCLA 3-item loneliness scale

- One in six respondents disclosed experiencing a new mental health issue since the onset of the pandemic in 2020

- A greater number of those in the 18-29 age group, who self-reported a mental health issue, also reported experiences of loneliness

- 18 per cent of people reported a lived experience of mental health issues.

5.7   Economic costs in Australia

Like the UK and US, research in Australia has found loneliness can have significant economic impacts on the Australian economy. According to the Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, loneliness costs the Australian economy $2.7 billion annually, with an average cost of approximately $1,565 per person per year.[50]

However, evidence suggests investment to address these issues can provide a positive return on investment. $1 invested in programs that address loneliness delivers a return on the investment of between $2.14 and $2.87.[51]

The Federal Government is giving greater recognition to the broader health, social, cultural and sustainability issues which are to be measured in its wellbeing budget statement for 'Measuring what matters for all Australians'.[52] Treasury has issued a framework for undertaking these measurements, which will complement the traditional financial and economic measurements in each budget. It is positive to note that social connections have been included under the cohesive theme.[53] However, as already outlined, social connections are only one element in the broader context of assessing and addressing loneliness. There remains scope for the framework to more adequately measure loneliness.

The Federal model could be considered by the NSW Government for increasing the measurement of loneliness and social connectedness. A wellbeing report should be published annually to assist in driving a whole-of-government approach and recognition of the importance of the policy issue.

Recommendation 4 – Review international and Australian data and research to learn from other jurisdictions, identify best practice data collection practices and identify any research gaps.

Recommendation 5 – Collect consistent data to determine the prevalence of loneliness and its economic costs. This data could be included in a wellbeing report.

6.   Learning from others

6.1   International

There have been significant developments in countries around the world in the past two to three years, as the increased data has highlighted the prevalence and impact of loneliness and a lack of social connections. The additional focus on the mental health impacts and changes to social connections post COVID-19 has additionally raised the profile of the issue and commitment of governments to respond. NSW can learn from others in the shaping of its policy response with many common approaches being taken in various jurisdictions.

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[50] Duncan A, Kiely D, Mavisakalyan A, Peters A, Seymour R, Twomey C, Vu L. 2021. Stronger Together: Loneliness and social connectedness in Australia, *Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre Focus on the States Series*, No. 8, pp. 13, 96.
[51] Groundswell Foundation. 2022. Connections Matter – A report on the impacts of loneliness in Australia, p. 22; National Mental Health Commission. 2019. Return on Investment: Prevention in mental health educational interventions to reduce older person's loneliness.
[52] Treasury. 2023. Measuring What Matters Statement.
[53] Treasury. 2023. Measuring What Matters Framework.

6.1.1   World Health Organization

On 15 November 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced a new Commission on Social Connection to address loneliness, recognising it as a pressing threat, to promote connection as a priority and to accelerate the scaling up of solutions in all countries.[54]

The WHO Commission on Social Connection (2024–2026) aims to see the issue recognised and resourced as a global public health priority.[55] The Commission will propose a global agenda on social connection, working with high-level Commissioners to make the case for action, marshal support to scale up proven solutions and measure progress. [56]

The Commission has three key priorities:[57]

1. Transforming popular understanding and engagement: Shift the public understanding and the conversation on social connection and see value in both a global digital campaign and community action to maximise impact.

2. Supporting national policies on social connection: National policies and laws show political commitment and establish regulations and guidelines that can foster social connection and reduce loneliness and social isolation.

3. Transforming the evidence base: Data on social isolation and loneliness is crucial to identify the extent of the issue, trends and track progress.

NSW can learn from the approach taken by the WHO. The challenges faced globally are very similar to those being faced locally. Education and awareness raising, a political and policy commitment to support social connectedness, and increased data and analysis to drive more specific policies, are all needed. This is the approach NSW should take in the development of a strategy to address loneliness and social connectedness.

6.1.2   Japan

In response to the growing levels of loneliness, the Japanese government in 2021 appointed a Minister for Loneliness and the Office for Policy on Loneliness and Isolation.[58] The Office has established taskforces to address three key themes:[59]

1. Utilising social media

2. Ascertaining people's loneliness and social isolation

3. Supporting collaboration among organisations involved in loneliness and isolation.

On 1 April 2024, Japan enacted the Act on the Advancement of Measures to Address Loneliness and Isolation.[60] The Act positions loneliness and isolation as an issue for society as a whole and obliges local governments to make efforts to establish local councils, comprising support groups for lonely people.[61] The government will also train people to support those suffering and promote the coordination and collaboration to advance effective measures to address the problem.[62] The passage of the Act demonstrates a political commitment to addressing the issue, alongside actions which provide support at a local level to assist communities. In addition, there are measures to increase public awareness.

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[54] World Health Organization. 2023. WHO launches commission to foster social connection.
[55] World Health Organization. 2024. WHO Commission on Social Connection.
[56] World Health Organization. 2024. WHO Commission on Social Connection.
[57] World Health Organization. 2024. WHO Commission on Social Connection.
[58] Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet. 2021. Preparatory Meeting of the Collaborative Platform for Loneliness and Isolation Measures (Provisional Name).
[59] Cabinet Secretariat – the Office for Policy on Loneliness and Isolation. There are supports for you.
[60] Act on the Advancement of Measures to Address Loneliness and Isolation (No 43 of 2023).
[61] Act on the Advancement of Measures to Address Loneliness and Isolation (No 43 of 2023).
[62] Act on the Advancement of Measures to Address Loneliness and Isolation (No 43 of 2023).

6.1.3   United States of America

On 3 May 2023, the US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released a New Surgeon General Advisory, calling attention to the public health crisis of loneliness, isolation and lack of connection in the country.[63] Advisories are reserved for significant public health challenges that need immediate attention.

The Advisory provides a framework for the US to establish a National Strategy to Advance Social Connection based on six foundational pillars and provides recommendations to individuals, government, workplaces, health systems and community organisations to increase their connection and improve their health.[64]

1. Strengthen Social Infrastructure: Connections are not just influenced by individual interactions, but also by the physical elements of a community (parks, libraries, playgrounds) and the programs and policies in place. To strengthen social infrastructure, communities must design environments that promote connection, establish and scale community connection programs, and invest in institutions that bring people together.

2. Enact Pro-Connection Public Policies: All governments have a role in establishing policies, like accessible public transport or paid family leave that can support and enable more connection among a community or family.

3. Mobilise the Health Sector: Because loneliness and isolation are risks factors for several major health conditions (including heart disease, dementia, depression) as well as for premature death, health care providers are well positioned to assess patients for risk of loneliness and intervene.

4. Reform Digital Environments: We must critically evaluate our relationship with technology and ensure that how we interact digitally does not detract from meaningful and healing connection with others. Technology can increase connectivity; it does not necessarily address the quality of those connections.

5. Deepen our Knowledge: A more robust research agenda, beyond the evidence outlined in the Advisory, must be established to further our understanding of the causes and consequences of social disconnection, populations at risk, and effectiveness of efforts to boost connection.

6. Cultivate a Culture of Connection: The informal practices of everyday life (the norms and cultures of how we engage one another) significantly influence the relationships we have in our lives. We cannot be successful in the other pillars without a culture of connection.

6.1.4   United Kingdom

The UK has been a leader in tackling loneliness and has implemented many policies which the NSW Government should consider. Refer to Appendices 8.2: Initiatives implemented by the UK Government which outlines further information on some of the measures implemented to address loneliness and social isolation in the UK.

The UK Government appointed the world's first Minister for Loneliness in 2018 and developed the first national strategy, A Connected Society: a strategy for tackling loneliness, recognising loneliness as one of the most pressing public health issues.[65]

The Strategy outlines a role for all parts of society and includes supporting the development of business champions to tackle loneliness in the workplace and technology companies to address the challenges of

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[63] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. New Surgeon General Advisory Raises Alarm about the Devastating Impact of the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in the United States.
[64] U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Health Effects of Social Isolation and Loneliness; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. New Surgeon General Advisory Raises Alarm about the Devastating Impact of the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in the United States; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community.
[65] UK Government. 2018. A connected society – A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change; UK Government. 2018. PM launches Government's first loneliness strategy.

loneliness and bullying in cyberspace.[66] The Strategy seeks to create new community spaces and grow the vital role of community organisations and outlines the importance of having a conversation.[67]

The Strategy has three objectives:[68]

1. Reducing stigma by building the national conversation on loneliness, so that people feel able to talk about loneliness and reach out for help

2. Driving a lasting shift so that relationships and loneliness are considered in policy-making and delivery by organisations across society, supporting and amplifying the impact of organisations that are connecting people

3. Playing our part in improving the evidence base on loneliness, making a compelling case for action, and ensuring everyone has the information they need to make informed decisions through challenging times.

As part of the Strategy, the UK Government will provide annual reports to outline the progress made to address the Strategy's aims, including initiatives to enable services to connect people, social prescribing (the use of link workers), strengthening local infrastructure, considering the housing and planning system, supporting digital inclusions, and raising awareness.[69]

In 2020, COVID-19 prompted the government to undertake a public campaign and establish the Tackling Loneliness Network (cross-sectoral collaboration), which is sharing research, policy and practice.[70]

6.1.5 Wales

The Welsh Government announced its own strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation, Connected Communities.[71] The Strategy sets out four clear priority areas to reduce social isolation and loneliness:[72]

1. Increasing Opportunities for People to Connect

2. A Community Infrastructure that Supports Connected Communities

3. Cohesive and Supportive Communities

4. Building Awareness and Promoting Positive Attitudes.

The Welsh Government also allocated 1.4 million pounds over three years for a Loneliness and Social Isolation Fund to test innovative approaches to tackling loneliness and social isolation and/or scale up promising approaches to reaching out to those who are already lonely and/or socially isolated.[73]

6.2 Australia

In Australia, loneliness and social isolation have been given greater recognition following COVID-19.

Previously, the issue has been focused primarily on an older population, to address the isolation of people ageing alone. Initiatives such as Neighbourhood Watch[74] and Men's Sheds[75] have been driven by a community desire to

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[66] UK Government. 2018. A connected society – A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change, p. 2.

[67] UK Government. 2018. A connected society – A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change, p. 2.

[68] UK Government. 2018. A connected society – A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change, p. 7; UK Government. Government's work on tackling loneliness.

[69] UK Government. 2018. A connected society – A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change.

[70] UK Government. 2020. Government launches plan to tackle loneliness during coronavirus lockdown.

[71] Welsh Government, Department of Health and Social Services. 2020. Connected Communities - A strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation and building stronger social connections.

[72] Welsh Government, Department of Health and Social Services. 2020. Connected Communities - A strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation and building stronger social connections, pp. 6-8.

[73] Welsh Government, Department of Health and Social Services. 2020. Connected Communities - A strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation and building stronger social connections, p 8.

[74] Neighbourhood Watch. 2024. Building Community Together.

[75] Australian Men's Shed Association. 2024. What is a Men's Shed?.

bring people together, recognising the importance of connectedness for the health and mental wellbeing of people. Meals on Wheels,[76] which provides for the delivery of food to the elderly, has also been a service considered to be playing a key role in ensuring people living alone, particularly the elderly, have personal contact.

However, the social isolation required for COVID-19 and the subsequent ongoing changes in the way people live their lives and work, and the increased prevalence of mental health issues, have generated a new focus. The demographics are different, and the responses must also be tailored in a different way.

Some initiatives have already begun, and it is important that NSW does not replicate, but instead complements these where possible, and, if appropriate, implements them at a local level.

At a national level, the Federal Government has addressed social connection in health promotion and preventative health measures including:[77]

- The National Preventative Health Strategy 2021–2030 which recognises social support and participation as determinants of health, including community cohesion and social connectivity.

- The National Primary Health Care 10 Year Plan 2022–2032 acknowledges the importance of social support systems, including evidence-based models of social prescribing and system navigation supports.

- The National Mental Health Commission's national report from 2022 highlighted the importance of social connection in both preventing and addressing mental illness, including 'connecting in community' as one of the five pillars in its 'Vision 2030'.

Ending Loneliness Together is a national network of organisations which seek to address the growing problem of loneliness in people living in Australia.[78] It also provides a range of resources aimed at supporting individuals and organisations to address loneliness.

6.2.1 Victoria

The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System provided recommendations which addressed mental health and wellbeing issues.[79]

The Victorian Government has implemented various initiatives to address loneliness such as the establishment of the Wellbeing Promotion Office and development of a 'Statewide Wellbeing Plan'.

Table 1: Initiatives implemented by the Victorian Government

Initiative	Description
Local Connections[80]	A social prescribing initiative being trialled in six local services to support people experiencing loneliness and social isolation to engage in community-based activities to build a sense of belonging and social connections.
Social Inclusion Action Groups[81]	Established by local councils, aimed to support social inclusion and connection.

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[76] Meals on Wheels New South Wales. 2021. About.
[77] Commonwealth of Australia represented by the Department of Health. 2021. The National Preventative Health Strategy 2021-2030; Commonwealth of Australia represented by the Department of Health. 2021. Future focused primary health care: Australia's Primary Health Care 10 Year Plan 2022-2032; National Mental Health Commission. 2023. National Report 2022 Reflections on a journey of change – personal experience of a decade of reform activity in mental health.
[78] Ending Loneliness Together. 2024.
[79] Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. 2021. Full Report.
[80] Victorian Government Department of Health. 2024. Local Connections – a social prescribing initiative.
[81] Victorian Government Department of Health. 2024. Social inclusion action groups.

Wellbeing Promotion Office[82]	Established in 2022, to lead a statewide approach to mental health promotion and prevention of mental health distress. It is in progress of developing a Wellbeing Strategy.

6.2.2   Queensland

The Queensland Parliament's Community Support and Services Committee conducted an inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland and made 14 recommendations to the Queensland Government across a range of policy areas in 2021.[83] The Queensland Government supported, in full or in principle, all recommendations which included agreeing key definitions, improved data collection, sharing best practice across the country, consideration of social prescribing, increased training for frontline service workers and support for Neighbourhood and Community Centres which can build the social connections.[84]

6.2.3   South Australia

The South Australian Government's 'Wellbeing Index for South Australia' is a monitoring tool that includes social connection and loneliness in survey data.[85]

6.2.4   ACT

The work of the HRI at the University of Canberra informs the ACT Government's Wellbeing Data Dashboard when reporting on the general wellbeing of Canberrans.[86]

The ACT Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion conducted an inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT.[87] The ACT Government has not provided a response to the report.

The ACT Government continues to support a range of measures and initiatives to address social connection, including a Wellbeing Framework, a Community Directory as well as other non-health related measures.

Table 2: Initiatives implemented by the ACT Government

Initiative	Description
ACT Community Directory[88]	The Directory is run by Volunteering ACT and provides information on services, groups, and clubs in the ACT.
ACT Taxi Subsidy Scheme (TSS)[89]	Assists Canberrans who have a disability or significant mobility restriction making public transport unusable.
ACT Wellbeing Framework[90]	A tool to consider social connection opportunities provided by programs and policies. It provides high-level indicator outcomes for the ACT, including subjective and objective measures.

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[82] Victorian Government Department of Health. 2024. Statewide Wellbeing Strategy.
[83] Queensland Parliament Community Support and Services Committee. 2021. Report No. 14, 57th Parliament – Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland.
[84] Queensland Parliament Community Support and Services Committee. 2021. Report No. 14, 57th Parliament – Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland – Queensland Government response.
[85] Preventative Health SA. Wellbeing Index for South Australia.
[86] ACT Government. Explore overall wellbeing.
[87] Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory. Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion. 2024. Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT.
[88] Volunteering ACT. 2024. My Community Directory.
[89] ACT Revenue Office. Taxi Subsidy Scheme.
[90] ACT Government. ACT Wellbeing Framework.

Carers Recognition Act 2021 (ACT)[91]	It aims to recognise, promote and value carers and care relationships, offering recognition from the ACT Government of the unique role of carers, and the associated challenges.
Community Diary[92]	Volunteering ACT provides a centralised location to search for events in the ACT.
Connect Up[93]	HRI at the University of Canberra is developing a new intervention currently funded under a Medical Research Future Fund grant. It will provide opportunities for 18–30-year-olds living in Belconnen and Bruce to meet new people through a range of free activities.
Living Well in the ACT Region[94]	The Survey conducted by the University of Canberra aims to measure, track and understand the wellbeing of adult residents living in the ACT region. It examines factors known to affect wellbeing at the individual, household, community and regional level.

6.2.5   New South Wales

The Mental Health Commission of NSW has undertaken a program of work with the aim of gaining deeper insights into the extent of loneliness across the State and exploring initiatives to mitigate and alleviate such feelings.[95] The Loneliness in Focus report analysed survey data and considered system level approaches, noting 'that loneliness is a common experience among the population of NSW'.[96]

The Commission integrated the UCLA 3-item loneliness scale into the annual Community Wellbeing Survey to provide nuanced understanding of loneliness prevalence rates in NSW and tested initiatives designed to combat stigma associated with loneliness and bolster social connectedness.[97]

The UCLA 3-item loneliness scale was selected as it is a reliable and widely used scale that uses indirect and negatively worded questions, with a fourth direct question, to screen for loneliness.[98]

The Commission has provided investment to test a range of initiatives which focus on improving individuals' social connections such as podcasts and support models.

Table 3: Initiatives supported by the Mental Health Commission of NSW

Initiative	Description
It's A Mindfield! Podcast[99]	An audio campaign led by people with lived experience of mental health issues which aims to de-stigmatise conversations about loneliness with a focus on improving social engagement.
Mentoring Men[100]	A specific population strategy where men voluntarily give or receive mentorship with a focus on increasing their social connectedness.

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[91] *Carers Recognition Act 2021* (ACT).
[92] Volunteering ACT. 2024. Community Diary.
[93] University of Canberra. Connect Up 2617.
[94] Regional Wellbeing Survey. Living Well in the ACT Region; University of Canberra. Examining wellbeing and quality of life in the ACT and surrounding areas of NSW.
[95] Mental Health Commission of New South Wales. 2023. Loneliness in Focus. An Insights Report, p. 1.
[96] Mental Health Commission of New South Wales. 2023. Loneliness in Focus. An Insights Report, p. 12.
[97] Mental Health Commission of New South Wales. 2023. Loneliness in Focus. An Insights Report, pp. 6, 11.
[98] Mental Health Commission of New South Wales. 2023. Loneliness in Focus. An Insights Report, p. 2.
[99] It's a Mind Field! 2023; Mental Health Commission of New South Wales. 2023. Loneliness in Focus. An Insights Report, p. 11.
[100] Mental Health Commission of New South Wales. 2023. Loneliness in Focus. An Insights Report, p. 11; Mentoring Men. 2024.

OneDoor Mental Health (Circles of Connection)[101]	A circle of support pilot model that aims to increase social connectedness and belonging for people with severe and enduring mental health issues through reconnecting them with people, places and things that matter to them and asking people to join their circle, with the goal of reciprocity and helping each other.

The NSW Government and local councils have also invested in a range of programs to address social connection through the delivery of grants and community-led initiatives.

Table 4: Initiatives implemented by the NSW Government and local councils

Initiative	Description
Community Gardens[102]	Liverpool City Council has engaged with community members to establish a community garden that will help people to come together to learn new skills and socialise.
Community Greening[103]	The NSW Department of Communities and Justice and the Royal Botanical Gardens encourage community residents to meet new people, learn about and grow plants and reduce their fresh food bill. It is a particular opportunity for those in social housing to create community gardens to increase green spaces in these areas. It has not been evaluated to date for reductions in loneliness, but qualitative and quantitative evidence suggest this type of greening activity is associated with a reduction in loneliness.
Connecting Seniors grant program[104]	In 2024, the NSW Government provided $600,000 in funding to 21 organisations for initiatives to help older people stay connected. This delivers on the Ageing Well in NSW: Seniors Strategy 2021-2031 with the Government committed to creating a more inclusive community and addressing isolation and loneliness.
Hornsby Village Hub[105]	The Sydney North Health Network established the Hub in 2022 in partnership with Hornsby Shire Council and community partners Fusion, Rotary Club of Hornsby District, PCYC, Ku-ring-gai Neighbourhood Centre, Hornsby Ku-ring-gai Hospital, Northern Sydney Local. This led to a community space providing groups and activities for older residents in the Hornsby region with a focus on improved connection.

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[101] Mental Health Commission of New South Wales. 2023. Loneliness in Focus. An Insights Report, p. 11; One Door Mental Health. 2024.
[102] Liverpool City Council. Community Gardens; Mental Health Commission of New South Wales. 2023. Loneliness in Focus. An Insights Report, p. 14.
[103] Botanic Gardens of Sydney. 2024. Community Greening; Groundswell Foundation. 2022. Connections Matter – A report on the impacts of loneliness in Australia, p. 20; Mental Health Commission of New South Wales. 2023. Loneliness in Focus. An Insights Report, p. 14; NSW Government. Fact Sheet: Community Greening.
[104] NSW Government Department of Communities and Justice. 2024. Connecting Seniors Grant Program 2025; NSW Government – Minister for Seniors. 2024. $600,000 in grants to help seniors stay connect.
[105] Mental Health Commission of New South Wales. 2023. Loneliness in Focus. An Insights Report, p. 14; Sydney North Health Network. About the Hornsby Village Hub.

7.   A leading strategy for NSW

The increased international and Australian response to the rising prevalence of loneliness and social isolation raises the urgency for action at a state level. It also creates the environment and opportunity for improved collaboration, best practice learnings and achieving the necessary political and community commitment.

As the evidence has highlighted, this is a complex issue for which there is no single solution or approach. As such, there are fundamental first steps which must be undertaken, and which will provide a strong basis for future work to develop the much-needed tailored policies and actions.

Importantly, this is a community challenge because it is in the workplace and in the suburbs or regional towns where social connectedness needs to occur. It is not solely for government to address. The Government can impact policy design and provide resources and leadership, but it must also bring business and civil society together to find the solutions.

7.1   Government

Emphasis must be placed on prevention and early intervention if we are to halt the increasing numbers of people who are lonely and reduce the potential for this to become a chronic condition which affects their social, mental and economic health.

The policy approach must be undertaken at two levels. The first is at a whole of community level that benefits all groups of people. The second level is to develop tailored initiatives given the subjective nature of loneliness, the range of contributing factors and the distinct groups who are at higher risk.

The NSW Government must develop its own whole of government strategy to ensure social connection is at the centre of all policy decisions and avoid duplication. The strategy should incorporate the following:[106]

- Create a set of standardised measures for loneliness and social isolation and associated definitions for relevant terms with stakeholders, with baseline information required to understand the effectiveness of measures
    - Establish consistent data collection process and standardised data and measures to support data collection for assessing the incidence and prevalence of loneliness, and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions
    - Develop a database of resources to enable individuals to make informed choices, access support and increase awareness.
- Invest in public awareness campaigns including education to reduce stigma and the development of national guidelines for social connection
    - These campaigns should support individuals to talk about loneliness and social isolation, including the ability to self-identify
    - A range of campaigns should be developed to target different sectors of the community

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[106] Australian Bureau of Statistics. Measuring What Matters; Black Dog Institute. 2024. What is loneliness and how can we overcome it in tough times?; Consumer Health Forum. 2021. Loneliness Thought Leadership Roundtable Report – Roadmap for addressing loneliness in Australia, pp. 9-10; Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness. 2017. Combatting loneliness one conversation at a time: A call to action; Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory. Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion. 2024. Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT, pp. vi, vii; Queensland Parliament Community Support and Services Committee. 2021. Report No. 14, 57th Parliament – Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland; UK Government. 2018. A connected society – A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change, p. 15; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, p. 55; Welsh Government, Department of Health and Social Services. 2020. Connected Communities - A strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation and building stronger social connections, pp. 26, 47.

- Disseminate information to enhance understanding of the widespread nature and profound impact of loneliness.

- Redesign, invest and expand urban infrastructure and community initiatives, including programs and policies which facilitate bringing people together
    - Identify and promote tools to help people reach out to others in their neighbourhood and local community to identify if someone is lonely, create meaningful connections and a sense of belonging
    - Shared spaces (indoor and outdoor) for people to meet and socialise are vital for tackling loneliness and helping communities to connect
    - Incorporate social connectedness within the considerations of urban design, such as the location of parks and community centres, and access to public transport
    - Include features that facilitate social connectedness within the architectural design of buildings.

- Invest in ongoing research and evaluation into loneliness to build the evidence base, demonstrate cost benefit and effective interventions to scale appropriately
    - Further evidence is needed to understand the impacts on populations at risk, with research to be undertaken in Australia to ensure the findings are context specific.

- Appoint the Department of Communities and Justice to be the lead coordinator for the government's approach to addressing loneliness.

- Consider developing a wellbeing framework and an accompanying report to be published annually.

7.1.1 The role of health care providers

Health care providers are at the frontline of engaging with people. They can assist in identifying those who are socially isolated and are at risk, and those for whom loneliness is already having an impact on their physical and mental health. For this reason, they will be an important part of the policy development and actions.

A key proposal that has been adopted elsewhere and has been proposed by the Consumers Health Forum of Australia is for the development of social prescribing.[107] This enables health care providers to recommend people to connect with their community to address their social isolation. It is a model which should be further explored.

To be effective, health care professionals will need to have information regarding the social services available in their area, such as local Men's Sheds, community groups or other activities relevant to the person. Funding may be required to further support increased referrals to these organisations or specific funding to cover the costs for the individual accessing programs.

Issues to consider are:[108]

- How best to support individuals to find and access community services and activities

- Implementing models that co-locate intergenerational services where people from different age groups can interact and develop connections

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[107] Consumers Health Forum of Australia. 2020. Social Prescribing.

[108] Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness. 2017. Combatting loneliness one conversation at a time: A call to action, p. 19; Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory. Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion. 2024. Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT, p. vii; Queensland Parliament Community Support and Services Committee. 2021. Report No. 14, 57th Parliament – Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland, p. xiii; UK Government. 2018. A connected society – A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, p. 57; Welsh Government, Department of Health and Social Services. 2020. Connected Communities - A strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation and building stronger social connections.

- Working with the Federal Government and health professions on the development of guidance for referring people experiencing loneliness to services to increase their social connectedness. This could form part of a national pilot for a social prescribing scheme based in primary health care settings, including training, databases to support referrals and evaluation to demonstrate the effectiveness and impact on levels of loneliness. This should further progress the discussions held at a roundtable earlier this year with a range of stakeholders including the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners and the Australian Social Prescribing Institute of Research and Education.[109]

- Providing funding for facilities and settings that are accessible and affordable and which belong to the community, including hubs where services can be co-located

- Utilising existing infrastructure and systems (e.g. Neighbourhood Houses, cultural networks) to support local communities

- Building a healthy peer-to-peer support system in the health and community services workforces that educates workers about the support services available and best practice programs.

7.2   Community

Community organisations play an important role in supporting and strengthening connections through leveraging existing facilities and networks. It is in the local neighbourhood, school or sporting groups, that the opportunity exists to break down social isolation.

The NSW Government should work with community groups, particularly in key target groups, to identify current effective programs which could be expanded further. It should also consider trialling new pilot projects to develop further evidence of their effectiveness, and where programs are successful, scale these up.

Opportunities to consider include:[110]

- Creating opportunities and spaces for inclusive social connection, including establishing programs to foster relationships

- Seeking and building partnerships with other community organisations (schools, workplaces) to support those experiencing loneliness and social isolation, to create a culture of connection

- Advancing public education and awareness efforts so community groups recognise the important role they play in reducing loneliness

- Designing and providing education, resources and support programs for community members and populations at risk

- Offering opportunities for philanthropic organisations to engage further in supporting community organisations in running social connectedness programs.

7.3   Individuals

As loneliness is very much an individual and subjective issue, it is important that any policy measures also acknowledge the importance of addressing how a person can themselves act.

The recommendation for an education and awareness campaign will play an important role in helping people to self-identify. There are then a range of actions individuals can undertake to reduce the impact of loneliness and

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[109] The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. 2024. Primary care at the heart of social prescribing national rollout.
[110] Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory. Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion. 2024. Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT, p. vii-viii; Queensland Parliament Community Support and Services Committee. 2021. Report No. 14, 57th Parliament – Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland, p. xiv; UK Government. 2018. A connected society – A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, p. 62; Welsh Government, Department of Health and Social Services. 2020. Connected Communities - A strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation and building stronger social connections, pp. 41, 60.

social isolation on their health and wellbeing. These should be incorporated into the campaign so people are aware of the practical steps they can take, such as:[111]

- Investing time in nurturing relationships through high-quality engagement with others

- Minimising distractions during conversations to increase the quality of time with others

- Seeking opportunities to provide services and support to others, by volunteering, helping friends and family or community

- Seeking help by utilising services such as local community groups, mental health supports such as Lifeline, or contacting their health professional

- Participating in social and community groups such as fitness, religious or hobby groups

- Being active, exercising and spending time outside

- Connecting with a range of stakeholders either in person or online (family, friends, local services).

7.4   Business

Employers also have a role to play to address loneliness and social isolation given the economic impacts it can have on the broader economy and on their workforces. Workplaces are a unique environment which provides the ability to strengthen an individual's connections and contribute to the wellbeing of the broader workforce.

The BCA's Mission includes creating 'inclusive workplaces' and we know that these types of workplaces foster an environment in which people are connected and part of a team. Working together lifts productivity and the overall economic performance of a business.

The NSW Government should partner with leading businesses to highlight the value of creating connected workplaces which benefit both employers and employees. Businesses should commit to:[112]

- Making social connection a priority in the workplace

- Fostering a workplace culture which allows people to connect with each other

- Considering opportunities and challenges posed by flexible work hours and arrangements, including in-person, remote, and hybrid which could impact an employee's ability to connect with others

- Training, resourcing and empowering leaders and managers to promote connections in the workplace and implement programs that foster connection, to assist employees experiencing loneliness and social isolation

- Leveraging existing leadership and employee training, orientation and wellness resources to educate the workforce about the importance of social connection for workplace wellbeing, health, productivity, performance, and retention

- Creating a culture that values volunteering and encourages businesses to support volunteer work by their employees

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[111] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2024. Social isolation and loneliness; Black Dog Institute. 2024. What is loneliness and how can we overcome it in tough times?; Healthdirect. 2024. Loneliness and isolation; Lifeline Support Toolkit. Loneliness – short-term help for loneliness; Lifeline Support Toolkit. Loneliness – long-term help for loneliness; National Health System. Dealing with loneliness; National Institute on Aging. 2024. Loneliness and Social Isolation – Tips for Staying Connected; UK Government. 2018. A connected society – A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, p. 66; Welsh Government, Department of Health and Social Services. 2020. Connected Communities - A strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation and building stronger social connections.

[112] UK Government. 2018. A connected society – A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change, p. 33; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, p. 61; Welsh Government, Department of Health and Social Services. 2020. Connected Communities - A strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation and building stronger social connections, p. 8.

- Supporting local community groups, such as sporting or cultural groups, which play an important role in fostering community engagement.

Recommendation 6 – Develop a coordinated strategy involving governments, business, community, researchers and other key stakeholders. The strategy should include:

- the agreement on a definition of loneliness, social isolation and social connection to ensure there is a consistent approach, including a data collection process and standardised data

- identification and analysis of those at most risk, to enable the policy responses to be effectively targeted

- a formal review of action undertaken in other jurisdictions to identify gaps and best practice

- recommendations on a framework to embed the issue in policy development across government

- a one-policy approach which considers the health, economic, social, cultural and environment factors surrounding the issue

- the Minister for Families and Communities to be the lead co-ordinating minister through the Department of Communities and Justice

- an emphasis on prevention and early intervention.

Recommendation 7 – Pilot new initiatives to assess their effectiveness, particularly for target groups, and scale up those that are proven to be effective.

Recommendation 8 – Support business initiatives which address loneliness, including community partnerships and engagement with community organisations.

Recommendation 9 – Create a public awareness campaign and education about the prevalence and consequences of loneliness, to de-stigmatise the issue and encourage people to access services and support.

Recommendation 10 – Roll out appropriate education training for frontline services, particularly those in mental health, health care professionals and community services to identify and support people impacted by loneliness.

Recommendation 11 – Work with the Federal Government and health professionals on the development of guidance for referring people experiencing loneliness to services to increase their social connectedness. This could form part of a national social prescribing pilot.

Recommendation 12 – Collaborate with community organisations and business to input into urban design plans which consider facilitating social connection.

Recommendation 13 – Strengthen existing health, social, education, and community infrastructure and services to provide tailored support and increased access to those at risk of, or who are currently experiencing, loneliness.

Recommendation 14 – Business to work together to raise awareness of loneliness in the workplace and develop a voluntary framework for addressing the issue with their workforce.

Recommendation 15 – Recognise and encourage business initiatives which support local community groups, including sporting or cultural groups, to enable people to connect which will foster greater community engagement.

8. Appendices

8.1 Concepts of loneliness, social isolation and social connection

8.1.1 Loneliness

Loneliness is a complex and personal concept, unique to individuals' different experiences.[113] Loneliness can be seen as an emotional state which arises when there is a perceived gap between an individual's desired and actual social connections, characterised by feelings of isolation or lack of companionship, even when surrounded by people.[114] It can be temporary or chronic.[115]

The subjective nature of loneliness means it can be a difficult issue to address as the needs of all individuals and circumstances are likely to be different. This also makes it harder to measure.[116] Some individuals can live socially connected lives and not feel lonely, while others may be very social and feel lonely.[117]

Being alone is a physical state and loneliness can be viewed as a form of social isolation, but some may view it as an emotional state and reaction to social isolation.[118]

8.1.1.1 Categories of Loneliness

To address loneliness, we need to understand the categories and types which can determine the most effective ways to address the issue. The three main categories to consider are:[119]

- Emotional loneliness: the absence of meaningful relationships

- Social loneliness: a perceived deficit in the quality of social connections

- Existential loneliness: a feeling of fundamental separateness from others and the wider world.

Other categories include:[120]

- Situation loneliness: the influence of socio-economic and cultural factors on an individual's loneliness

- Developmental loneliness: individuals have an innate desire of intimacy or a need to be related to others

- Internal loneliness: being alone does not inherently make an individual lonely. It is the perception of being alone which makes a person lonely. Personal factors, such as low self-esteem, influence this category.

8.1.1.2 Types of Loneliness

Individuals will have different experiences of loneliness. There are three types of loneliness:[121]

- Transient loneliness: A feeling that comes and goes

- Situational loneliness: A feeling that only occurs at certain times

- Chronic loneliness: Feeling lonely all or most of the time.

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[113] National Health System. Dealing with loneliness; R U OK?. Let's end loneliness together.
[114] Strawa C. 2022. Understanding and defining loneliness and social isolation. *Australian Institute of Family Studies.*
[115] Black Dog Institute. 2024. What is loneliness and how can we overcome it in tough times?.
[116] What Works Wellbeing. 2019. A brief guide to measuring loneliness for charities and social enterprises, p. 9.
[117] Black Dog Institute. 2024. What is loneliness and how can we overcome it in tough times?.
[118] Campaign to End Loneliness. 2024. Facts and statistics about loneliness; National Health System. Dealing with loneliness; St Vincent's Hospital Sydney. 2023. If you're feeling lonely, you're not alone.
[119] Campaign to End Loneliness. 2024. Facts and statistics about loneliness; Mansfield L, Daykin, N, Meads C, Tomlinson A, Gray K, Lane J, Victor C. 2019. A conceptual review of loneliness across the adult life course (16+years) – synthesis of qualitative studies.
[120] Tiwari S. 2013. Loneliness: A disease? *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 55(4), 320-22.
[121] Campaign to End Loneliness. 2024. Facts and statistics about loneliness.

8.1.1.3   Key Features of Loneliness

Key features of loneliness which are prominent across the literature and ongoing research, include:[122]

- Subjective experience: Loneliness is how an individual perceives their social relationships

- Emotional Discomfort: An individual may feel a level of discomfort due to their subjective view of social isolation

- Economic Impacts: Loneliness can impact an individual and, more broadly, the community and economy

- Health Impacts: Loneliness can impact an individual's physical and mental health

- Social Impacts: Loneliness can motivate individuals to seek greater social connections.

A review of international research and literature indicates there are numerous definitions of loneliness.

Table 5: Example definitions of loneliness across the globe

Source	Definition
Campaign to End Loneliness[123]	A subjective, unwelcome feeling of a lack or loss of companionship. It happens when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of the social relationships that an individual has and those that an individual wants.
Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness[124]	A subjective, unwelcome feeling of a lack or loss of companionship which happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relations that we have, and those that we want.
Mind UK[125]	The feeling we have when our need for social contact and relationships is not met, but loneliness is not the same as being alone.
National Institute of Aging[126]	The distressing feeling of being alone or separated.
US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention[127]	Feeling alone or disconnected from others. It is feeling like you do not have meaningful or close relationships or a sense of belonging. It reflects the difference between a person's actual and desired level of connection.
US Surgeon General[128]	It is a subjective internal state. Loneliness is the distressing experience that results from perceived isolation or unmet need between an individual's preferred and actual experience.
World Health Organization[129]	The pain we feel when our social connections do not meet our needs.

A review of domestic research and literature indicates there are numerous definitions of loneliness.

Table 6: Example definitions of loneliness across Australia

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[122] Campaign to End Loneliness. 2024. Facts and statistics about loneliness; Ending Loneliness Together in Australia. 2020. Ending Loneliness Together in Australia White Paper; Lifeline Support Toolkit. Loneliness – what is loneliness?; Modglin L. 2023. What is Loneliness? Causes, Effects and Prevention. Forbes Health.

[123] Campaign to End Loneliness. 2024. Facts and statistics about loneliness.

[124] Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness. 2017. Combatting loneliness one conversation at a time: A call to action, p. 8.

[125] Mind. 2024. About loneliness.

[126] National Institute on Aging. 2024. Loneliness and Social Isolation – Tips for Staying Connected.

[127] U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Health Effects of Social Isolation and Loneliness.

[128] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, p. 7.

[129] World Health Organization. 2021. What is social isolation and loneliness?.

Source	Definition
Australian Capital Territory Inquiry[130]	It is subjective, involving an 'unpleasant or distressing feeling' where a person feels they do not have sufficient, or sufficiently high quality, social relationships.
Australian Institute of Family Studies[131]	Subjective feeling about, or a perception of, the quality of social connections. It is a gap between the actual and desired levels of social relationships and connections.
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare[132]	Subjective unpleasant or distressing feeling of a lack of connection to other people, along with a desire for more, or more satisfying, social relationships.
Black dog Institute[133]	Negative feeling that arises when social needs are unmet by the quantity and quality of current social relationships.
Ending Loneliness Together[134]	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.
Lifeline[135]	Feeling of wanting greater social connection than an individual may have. It generally relates to the quality of relationships, rather than quantity of relationships and it is about how close an individual feels to people.
Mental Health Commission of NSW[136]	A subjective emotional state characterised by negative feelings stemming from a perceived lower level of social contact compared to one's desired level.

8.1.2   Social Isolation

Social isolation refers to the experience of an individual who has few to very little social contacts or support. It is a state where an individual lacks meaningful social relationships and is an objective measure of the number of social interactions.[137]

8.1.2.1   Features of Social Isolation

Key features of social isolation include:[138]

- Lack of or limited social connections and interactions: An individual may have few or no social interactions or relationships

- Health Impacts: An individual may have an increased risk of physical and mental health conditions

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[130] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2023. Australia's welfare: 2023 data insights - Chapter 2: Social isolation, loneliness and wellbeing; Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory. Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion. 2024. Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT, p. 2.

[131] Strawa C. 2022. Understanding and defining loneliness and social isolation. *Australian Institute of Family Studies*.

[132] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2024. Social isolation and loneliness.

[133] Black Dog Institute. 2024. What is loneliness and how can we overcome it in tough times?.

[134] Ending Loneliness Together in Australia. 2020. Ending Loneliness Together in Australia White Paper.

[135] Lifeline Support Toolkit. Loneliness.

[136] Mental Health Commission of New South Wales. 2023. Loneliness in Focus. An Insights Report.

[137] Ending Loneliness Together in Australia. 2020. Ending Loneliness Together in Australia White Paper.

[138] Campaign to End Loneliness. 2024. Facts and statistics about loneliness; Ending Loneliness Together in Australia. 2020. Ending Loneliness Together in Australia White Paper; Lifeline Support Toolkit. Loneliness – what is loneliness?; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community.

- Vulnerable populations: Certain populations are more at risk of social isolation, such as migrants who feel isolated from their new community

- Environmental factors: The availability of community and public resources can influence an individual's social isolation

- Social Determinants: Broader social determinants can affect an individual's ability to connect with others.

A review of international research and literature indicates there are numerous definitions of social isolation.

Table 7: Example definitions of social isolation across the globe

Source	Definition
National Institute of Aging[139]	The lack of social contacts and having few people to interact with regularly.
US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention[140]	A person does not have relationships, contact with, or support from others and has little to no social support.
US Surgeon General[141]	Objectively having few social relationships, social roles, group memberships, and infrequent social interaction.
Word Health Organization[142]	The state of having a smaller number of social contacts which may contribute to loneliness.

A review of domestic research and literature indicates there are numerous definitions of social isolation.

Table 8: Example definitions of social isolation across Australia

Source	Definition
ACT Government Inquiry[143]	It can be objectively measured and refers to infrequent social contact and/or few social relationships.
Australian Institute of Family Studies[144]	An objective, measurable lack of contact with social connections, usually when a person experiences a low number of social interactions
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare[145]	Objectively few social relationships or roles and infrequent social contact.
Ending Loneliness Together[146]	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.

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[139] National Institute on Aging. 2024. Loneliness and Social Isolation – Tips for Staying Connected.
[140] U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Health Effects of Social Isolation and Loneliness.
[141] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, p. 7.
[142] World Health Organization. 2021. What is social isolation and loneliness?.
[143] Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory. Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion. 2024. Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT, p. 2; Strawa C. 2022. Understanding and defining loneliness and social isolation. *Australian Institute of Family Studies.*
[144] Strawa C. 2022. Understanding and defining loneliness and social isolation. *Australian Institute of Family Studies.*
[145] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2024. Social isolation and loneliness.
[146] Ending Loneliness Together in Australia. 2020. Ending Loneliness Together in Australia White Paper, p. 11.

Mental Health Commission of NSW[147]	Characterised by limited interaction with others.

8.1.3 Social Connection

Social connection is an important concept to understand as it relates to loneliness and social isolation. In essence, social connection is the state of connection or feeling close to others.[148] It can be viewed as the opposite of loneliness. An individual's social connection does not necessarily mirror their social relationships.

A review of international research and literature indicates there are numerous definitions of social connection.

Table 9: Example definitions of social connection across the globe

Source	Definition
US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention[149]	The size and diversity of one's social network and roles, the functions these relationships serve, and their positive and negative qualities.
US Surgeon General[150]	A continuum of the size and diversity of one's social network and roles, the functions these relationships serve, and their positive and negative qualities.
World Health Organization[151]	The foundation of well-functioning families, communities, societies and economies.

A review of domestic research and literature indicates there are numerous definitions of social connection.

Table 10: Example definitions of social connection across Australia

Source	Definition
ACT Government Inquiry[152]	Being involved in the community and having meaningful connections.
Carers NSW Australia[153]	The quality and depths of relationships that individuals have with others.

8.2 Initiatives implemented by the UK Government

The UK Government has implemented a range of initiatives to address loneliness and social isolation since the launch of its initial strategy in 2018.

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[147] Mental Health Commission of New South Wales. 2023. Loneliness in Focus. An Insights Report.
[148] O'Rourke H, Sidani S. 2017. Definition, Determinants, and Outcomes of Social Connectedness for Older Adults: A Scoping Review, *Journal of Gerontological Nursing*; 43(7).
[149] U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2024. Social Connection.
[150] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, p. 7.
[151] World Health Organization. Technical Advisory Group on Social Connection (TAG-SC).
[152] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Determinants of wellbeing: social connection; Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory. Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion. 2024. Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT, p. 2.
[153] Carers NSW Australia. Carer Health and Wellbeing - Building social connections.

Table 11: Initiatives implemented by the UK Government

Initiative	Description
Activity in Community Spaces[154]	As part of Loneliness Week 2019, the Government announced it was partnering with the Co-op Foundation to match-fund a new £1.6 million initiative that supports activity in community spaces to promote social connections.
Building Connections Fund and other funding[155]	In 2018, the UK Government launched the first government fund worth £20 million for charities and community groups to help isolated people and those suffering from loneliness. This also included a £11 million 'Building Connections Fund' to help bring communities together.
Let's Talk Loneliness[156]	Launched in 2019, this was a commitment from the Strategy which brought together charities, organisations and businesses including The Marmalade Trust, the Co-op Foundation, the British Red Cross, the Campaign to End Loneliness, Mind, Public Health England and the Jo Cox Foundation to help people talk about their feelings. The campaign also launched a short film 'Less of a Lonely Place', featuring voices of young people from across the UK talking about their personal experiences of loneliness, brought to life by young animators. Advertisements for the campaign were presented on 20 big screens in cities across the country.
Lift Someone out of loneliness[157]	The campaign primarily aimed to reach 16–34-year-olds by continuing to encourage them to 'Lift Someone Out of Loneliness', knowing that this will likely help their own feelings of loneliness.
Minister for Loneliness[158]	Announced in 2018, the Minister was promoted based off the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness.
Social Prescribing[159]	To change the way individuals experiencing loneliness are treated, more than medical prescriptions. The UK Government will invest millions of pounds in connecting people in primary care with community support (non-medical) to restore social contact. This will play a key preventative role. Service users could receive up to 12 weeks' support from a link worker alongside volunteers who focused on developing service users' confidence. An evaluation found 72.6% of participants reported feeling less lonely after receiving support and there was a statistically significant change in their loneliness scores. The intervention's cost-benefit analysis estimated a social return on investment of £3.42 per £1 invested in the service.

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[154] UK Government. 2019. 'Let's Talk Loneliness' campaign launched to tackle stigma of feeling lonely.
[155] UK Government. 2018. £20 million investment to help tackle loneliness.
[156] UK Government. 2019. 'Let's Talk Loneliness' campaign launched to tackle stigma of feeling lonely.
[157] UK Government 2022. Government's work on tackling loneliness.
[158] UK Government. 2018. PM launches Government's first loneliness strategy.
[159] Foster A, Thompson J, Holding E, Ariss S, Mukuria C, Jacques R, Akparido R, Haywood A. 2021. Impact of social prescribing to address loneliness: A mixed methods evaluation of a national social prescribing programme. *Health & Social Care Community*, 29(5); UK Government. 2018. A connected society – A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change; UK Government. 2022. £3.6 million social prescribing funding for mental health support.

Tech to Connect Challenge Prize[160]	As part of Loneliness Week 2019, the Government invested £1 million in a Tech to Connect Challenge Prize. The Prize was designed and delivered by charitable foundation Nesta with an aim to find tech solutions to the problem of social isolation. Charities and social enterprises could receive up to £500,000 to incentivise social tech innovation. The £1 million prize was split into £500,000 of business support from Nesta with the other £500,000 being awarded as cash prizes to the best entrants.
UK National Strategy to reduce loneliness – A connected society[161]	In 2018, the UK published the world's first government loneliness strategy to address issues and interventions for loneliness. Implementation of the strategy is ongoing, and the effects are yet to be evaluated. Annual reports relay progress.

[160] UK Government. 2019. 'Let's Talk Loneliness' campaign launched to tackle stigma of feeling lonely.
[161] UK Government. 2018. A connected society – A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change; UK Government. 2018. PM launches Government's first loneliness strategy.

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