

Supplementary
Submission
No 62a

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

Organisation: Humans:Connecting

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HUMANS:CONNECTING

SUPPLEMENTARY SUBMISSION

to the New South Wales Legislative Council's
Standing Committee on Social Issues'

**Inquiry into the prevalence,
causes and impacts of
loneliness in New South Wales**

February 2025

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Phil McAuliffe
Founder
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Hon Dr Sarah Kaine MLC
Chair
Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues
New South Wales Parliament House
6 Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Friday 14 February 2025

Dear Chair

SUPPLEMENTARY SUBMISSION

Further to HUMANS:CONNECTING's primary submission and oral evidence given to the Standing Committee on Thursday 6 February 2025, we submit this supplementary submission for the Standing Committee's further consideration.

Our supplementary submission provides further information and context on issues arising from questions asked by members of the Standing Committee on Thursday 6 February 2025.

It also contains an item for the Standing Committee's further consideration in balancing the need for more research with the need to take immediate action to support the people of New South Wales (point 5 refers).

HUMANS:CONNECTING

Supplementary submission to the Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues' Inquiry into prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales.

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I remain available to answer any questions or provide further statements or other support to the Standing Committee should it request.

Yours sincerely

Phil McAuliffe

Founder – HUMANS:CONNECTING

Part of the lonely diplomat

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1. Asked by the Hon Dr Sarah Kaine MLC – Chair

Many [witnesses and submissions] speak about interventions, conversations, and connections. Getting very practical about it, because that seems obvious – but it's not happening – so what is it that you recommend that actually creates those opportunities? What are the policies? How do we get to those conversations?

1.1 Supplementary to our verbal answer, HUMANS:CONNECTING offers the following:

1.1.1 Awareness campaigns about social isolation and loneliness are essential educational tools. These campaigns are most effective when people feel genuinely heard and when they help destigmatize the experience, moving conversations beyond just the elderly and bereaved to highlight that loneliness affects everyone.

1.1.2 While awareness campaigns are essential, they are only a first step.

1.1.3 Currently, we understand the devastating impact of social isolation and loneliness on our societies very well, but we lack comprehensive knowledge about effective solutions. Despite this evidence gap, immediate action is necessary. We recommend the following approach:

- Year 1: using the World Health Organization's evidence gap maps, establishing NSW expert panels (comprising scientists, advocates, practitioners, and policy makers) to evaluate intervention effectiveness, applicability to NSW citizens, and associated costs.
- Year 2: implementation with robust monitoring systems.

1.1.4 For immediate relief, we can implement initiatives that seem to have some grounding. Simple ideas that people can incorporate into daily life include adding a Chatter Line (as demonstrated by Dutch grocery chain Jumbo), creating non-profits connecting elderly individuals with dog-sitting opportunities (like Stichting Oohpoe), or adopting youth connection programs.

- HUMANS:CONNECTING is confident that the Standing Committee is aware of many initiatives throughout New South Wales through its inquiry.

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1.1.5 Such campaigns that inform AND empower can effectively facilitate these conversations. They provide clear pathways for individuals and organizations to engage in human connection, reducing fears about "getting it wrong" and offering alternatives to overburdened crisis support services or mental health specialists with long waitlists.

1.1.6 Paragraphs 11.1 to 11.2.4 of our initial submission provide further detail. HUMANS:CONNECTING stands ready to provide further support, if needed.

2. Asked by the Hon Mr Taylor Martin MLC

Hypothetically, you wake up tomorrow and you're the Premier. What would you want to implement to see movement in this space?

2.1 HUMANS:CONNECTING's verbal response referred to Recommendation 3 of the initial submission. We provide that below for ease of reference.

RECOMMENDATION 3 - The New South Wales Government includes the concept of *belonging* and improving the social health of people within Government considerations – particularly in budget, policy design and planning decisions.

Templates for Cabinet and Ministerial submissions used by the New South Wales Public Service to be amended to answer the question: *how will this proposal positively impact the social health of the people affected by this decision?* This is an opportunity for the New South Wales Government to integrate improved social connectedness into all areas of public policy development and implementation.

2.2 As a supplementary response to the Hon Mr Martin MLC, should Mr McAuliffe find himself as Premier, he recognises that while government is a crucial actor in addressing social isolation and loneliness in New South Wales, sustainable solutions require broader societal engagement.

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- 2.2.1 Premier McAuliffe's first directive would elevate social health and wellbeing to equal standing with economic and environmental impacts in all government decision-making, as outlined in Recommendation 3 of our initial submission.
- 2.2.2 Given the nature of loneliness, he would immediately establish cross-party and bicameral cooperation in Parliament. This approach recognises that effective interventions require sustained commitment beyond electoral cycles, as evidenced by successful initiatives across the political spectrum internationally.
- 2.2.3 He would convene a high-level working group within 100 days, led by a senior Premier's Department official. This group would include:
- leading academics and public policy experts;
 - individuals with lived experience of loneliness;
 - representatives from metropolitan, regional, rural and remote communities;
 - key stakeholders from economic, health, education, and community portfolios.
- 2.2.4 Rather than creating a Minister for Social Connection - which risks isolating the issue - Premier McAuliffe would ensure the working group reports directly to him and is embedded within the Premier's Department. This structure provides both political authority and bureaucratic gravitas needed to address the complex economic, social, and health impacts of loneliness and social disconnection.
- 2.2.5 The working group would simultaneously drive research and action, recognising that New South Wales residents need immediate support while we build longer-term evidence-based solutions. Their mandate would be clear: deliver tangible improvements in community connection within 12 months.
- 2.2.6 Premier McAuliffe would establish a comprehensive Social Connection Index, measuring not just connection levels but their economic impact. This index would:
- track monthly social connection metrics;
 - quantify economic benefits of increased social connection;
 - provide data for evidence-based policy making;
 - demonstrate the return on investment in social connection initiatives.

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2.2.7 Premier McAuliffe would position New South Wales as a leader in measuring social connection's economic impact through the Social Connection Index. This innovative approach would:

- track monthly social connection metrics alongside traditional economic indicators;
- demonstrate how stronger community bonds drive economic growth through:
 - increased small business activity in socially connected neighbourhoods;
 - higher workforce participation and productivity;
 - reduced healthcare costs from better mental and physical health;
 - greater local spending in communities with strong social ties.
- provide compelling data showing social connection as an economic multiplier.

2.2.8 This evidence-based approach would form the centrepiece of his next campaign, demonstrating how investments in social connection are delivering measurable economic returns for New South Wales. The message would be clear: socially connected communities are economically thriving communities.

2.2.9 The working group would establish formal partnerships with:

- other Australian jurisdictions to share best practices;
- the European Union's social connection indicator program;
- research institutions in Australia and globally studying social connection;
- leading organisations implementing successful programs globally.

2.2.10 Finally, recognising the government's role as enabler rather than sole solution provider, we would launch a comprehensive public engagement campaign empowering New South Wales residents to prioritise and improve their social wellbeing through practical, community-led initiatives.

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3. Asked by the Hon Ms Natasha Maclaren-Jones MLC – Deputy Chair

Is there any role that we have with the UK or French governments?

- 3.1 We fear that our initial response to this question was unclear. HUMANS:CONNECTING does not yet have any roles supporting the UK or French governments. Our research partners, Annecy Behavioral Science Lab, have in the past worked with the French government, while they are currently working with the World Health Organization. In the next three years, they will be developing the monitoring framework for social isolation and loneliness for the European Union, and they will support the writing of policy briefs for the 27 EU member states.

4. Asked by the Hon Mr Scott Barrett MLC

About your journey into loneliness. Is there a path that you'd wished you'd taken or a path that was there or one that was better linked on my journey here.

- 4.1 Mr McAuliffe's verbal evidence spoke of him wishing that he had had the courage to be himself earlier in life. He shared that he wished that he had made decisions while at secondary school where he allowed himself to be who he was, not who he thought others wanted him to be.
- 4.2 HUMANS:CONNECTING wishes to supplement this response with an additional point about accessing support services that the Standing Committee may find useful.
- 4.2.1 As an individual, of course I reflect on what I could have changed and how I could have taken responsibility or not waited for permission. There are always things I could have done better, been more courageous and spoken up. I am the sum of my decisions and the path that I have taken through life has lead me to this point.
- 4.2.2 However, we know from research that loneliness and social isolation are most often caused by systemic factors, such as work environments, discrimination, or lack of supporting resources (in communities, workplaces, and households). While there are individual factors, we also need to shift attention away from the individual when talking about loneliness. Loneliness is not an individual's fault.

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4.2.3 One of the first things I think needed to change in my environment is that my work environment should have had the resources available to support people like me.

- It took courage for me to call my employer's Employee Assistance Provider (EAP). I feared that as my employer required me to be psychologically resilient, I would not be found unsuitable to do my job or that life – and that of my family – would change for the worse. I feared that I was broken.
- My experience with EAP was what we know now to be poor. I received pity and given the same advice by the counsellor that I found for myself on Google. I felt unheard, dismissed, and my experience was (unintentionally) belittled (HUMANS:CONNECTING now understands that this response is common, as some counsellors do not know how to respond to loneliness).

4.2.4 That is why I started creating the resources that I needed but were not available. I wish I knew more about loneliness, how it is a normal response to life's transitions and how I could use it to feel more connected. New South Wales can create a structure that is accessible to all.

4.3 We share this pivotal experience with the Standing Committee as an example of the need to have resources that both *inform and empower* individuals, families, friends, community organisations, schools and workplaces to choose the connection they need confidently.

- It is important to us that our work at HUMANS:CONNECTING does not speak at people in an impersonal, generic way. We seek to humanise the need for connection. We sit beside them and empower them to listen to and learn from their loneliness. It is in this way that we begin to get the connection that their loneliness is telling us that they are not receiving.

5. For further consideration

5.1 HUMANS:CONNECTING offers these concluding thoughts on balancing immediate action with evidence-building in New South Wales.

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- 5.2 As established earlier, while we must better understand social isolation and loneliness in New South Wales, we cannot delay action while waiting for perfect evidence. Our previous recommendations outlined practical steps that can be taken immediately while building our knowledge base.

International Context and Opportunity

- 5.3 The European Union is currently developing LONELY-EU, an initiative that will provide a comprehensive framework for addressing social isolation and loneliness through evidence-based policy recommendations, systematic monitoring, and cross-sector collaboration.

- As founding members through our partnership with Annecy Behavioral Science Lab, HUMANS:CONNECTING is actively connected to this development.

- 5.4 The initiative will establish the European Social Isolation and Loneliness Index and create policy briefs translating research into actionable recommendations for policymakers at local, national and EU levels.

Making progress in New South Wales

- 5.5 However, we cannot wait for these frameworks to be fully developed. We all know that people in New South Wales are experiencing social isolation and loneliness now. HUMANS:CONNECTING and our research partners can help bridge this gap, providing interim policy guidance based on our expertise while the more comprehensive evidence base is being built. We can adapt emerging insights from the LONELY-EU development process to inform immediate actions in New South Wales.

- 5.6 Most importantly, we already know that meaningful human connection is the antidote to social isolation and loneliness. While we continue gathering evidence and developing measurement frameworks, we can and must act now to encourage and empower the people of New South Wales to choose connection in their daily lives.

- 5.7 HUMANS:CONNECTING welcomes the opportunity to further support the Standing Committee – and through it, the New South Wales Government – in this vital and urgent work.