REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES

PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF LONELINESS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

CORRECTED

At Moresby Room, Orange Ex-Services' Club, Orange, on Friday 7 February 2025

The Committee met at 10:20.

PRESENT

The Hon. Dr Sarah Kaine (Chair)

The Hon. Scott Barrett
The Hon. Bob Nanva

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

The Hon. Anthony D'Adam
The Hon. Taylor Martin
The Hon. Emily Suvaal

The CHAIR: Welcome to the fourth hearing of the Committee's inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales. I acknowledge the Wiradjuri people, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders, past and present, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today.

My name is Sarah Kaine and I am the Chair of the Committee. I ask everyone to turn their mobile phones to silent. Parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses in relation to the evidence they give today. However, it does not apply to witnesses outside the hearing. I urge witnesses to be careful about making comments to the media or to others after completing evidence. In addition, the Legislative Council has adopted rules to provide procedural fairness for inquiry participants. I encourage Committee members and witnesses to be mindful of these procedures.

Ms JACKIE LANIGAN, Community Engagement/Migrant Support, Bathurst Neighbourhood Centre, before the Committee

Ms FRAN STEAD, Chief Executive Officer, Cowra Information and Neighbourhood Centre, before the Committee

Ms KAREN PEARSON, Compliance Officer, Cowra Information and Neighbourhood Centre, before the Committee

Ms DIANNE SCOTT, Executive Officer, Parkes Neighbourhood Central, before the Committee

Mrs MAVIS MOON, Community Member, Parkes Neighbourhood Central, before the Committee

Mrs LYN PENGILLY, Community Member, Parkes Neighbourhood Central, before the Committee

Mr CAN YASMUT, Executive Officer, Local Community Services Association, before the Committee

The CHAIR: We're starting today with a roundtable discussion. Before we begin with that and what that looks like, I do also want to acknowledge that online we have three of our Committee members, for the benefit of those in the room today. We have the Hon. Anthony D'Adam, the Hon. Emily Suvaal and the Hon. Taylor Martin, who are with us virtually today. Again, welcome, and thank you for making time to travel to and be at this roundtable discussion. The purpose of holding a session in this roundtable format is to have an informal and free-flowing discussion about the experiences of loneliness in regional communities. It is a chance for us to have a more informal conversation and to have it a bit more free-flowing than we normally would with a traditional question and answer session. But we would ask if we can all be mindful that Hansard is still trying to capture what we're saying, so if we could speak one at a time—and I probably am the one that needs to be reminded most of that in the room, to be honest.

As roundtable participants, you're not required to take an oath or affirmation or to make an opening statement. But we will start with brief introductions from everyone who is at the table—really brief so that we have lots of time for discussion. As I said, I'm the Chair of the Committee. I think this is our fourth hearing day in this inquiry, so we are really very much looking forward to hearing about the experiences of those of you who are dealing with this issue out beyond the metropolitan areas. We have had Sydney-based hearings to date. Thank you again very much for coming. Maybe we'll start with Mrs Pengilly and go around the table—just a very quick introduction of where you're from.

LYN PENGILLY: I come from Parkes and I get services from Neighbourhood Central.

DIANNE SCOTT: I'm the Executive Officer of Neighbourhood Central at Parkes. We have DCJ funding for family support and our neighbourhood centre. We also run a variety of aged-care programs under the Commonwealth Government, including social support services.

MAVIS MOON: I'm from Parkes. I get help from the neighbourhood centre.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Lovely to have you here.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: I'm a member of the Legislative Council.

CAN YASMUT: I'm the Executive Officer of the Local Community Services Association, which is the peak body for neighbourhood and community centres in New South Wales.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Nice to have you with us again.

CAN YASMUT: Thank you for the invite.

KAREN PEARSON: I work at the Cowra Information and Neighbourhood Centre as a compliance officer, but I'm here today also because I live on my own.

FRAN STEAD: I'm CEO of Cowra Information and Neighbourhood Centre. We're a multi-service organisation. We're State funded with TEI, family support and community builders. We're also federally funded for a variety of Indigenous programs. We also run NDIS early intervention, day programs and aged-care home mods and maintenance. I also must say that I also sit on the LCSA board, so I really believe in what neighbourhood centres offer community.

JACKIE LANIGAN: I'm here representing the Bathurst Neighbourhood Centre today. My role there is a migrant support worker, and I also coordinate a lot of the programs that we offer the community. We just wanted to support the LCSA recommendations that neighbourhood centres provide great social structure for reducing loneliness and social isolation in New South Wales.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'm a member of the Committee but also an Orange local. I just wanted to take the opportunity to thank the Committee for coming out to the regions, in particular Orange. Thanks everyone for coming along and thanks also to the secretariat and everyone that helped make this happen.

MERRIN THOMPSON: I work for the secretariat of the Committee.

The CHAIR: As I said, we're hoping to have this as quite conversational. I might kick off but then I'm very happy for you to indicate that you would like to respond to what someone is saying and to keep it in that conversational mode. I'd really like to start by hearing from Mrs Moon and Mrs Pengilly about how you engage with the centre and what that means in terms of staying connected socially, if either of you wanted to offer us your experience.

MAVIS MOON: I started to go to the neighbourhood centre. I lost my two sisters within 12 months of one another. I was very lonely and I went to the neighbourhood centre. I go to their lunches. I go to the movies when they have movies and bus trips. It has really brought me out. I've met lovely people and I really enjoy it.

LYN PENGILLY: I sort of do what Mavis does as well. My experience with loneliness was probably at its worst when my husband was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2017. I looked after him all the time, right through until he passed away. That was a really lonely time for me because I lost all conversations with my husband. We couldn't have a conversation. At that particular time, that was very lonely. After that I got more involved with the neighbourhood centre and I made my way back that way, with company and joining in with other things they have there at the centre.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. That reflects the evidence we've been receiving about carers and the experience of carers being a particularly vulnerable group. I'm not sure if there are others who have groups for carers. We heard about some yesterday and certainly we've had evidence from carers' groups about that and also the junctures at which loneliness impacts more—ill health, bereavement. Thank you for sharing that. I wondered if any of the neighbourhood centres here wanted to offer up some examples of the types of things you do specifically, say, for carers or for cohorts that are particularly vulnerable to loneliness or isolation.

FRAN STEAD: What I would say—and I can only speak for Cowra—is that you meet your community where your community is at that particular time. We don't want particular programs as such for that because there is a different gamut of how we measure loneliness. They're from all different areas. It's not so much a program. We offer lots of programs at the centre, but we like to create that space that people can just drop in to. They don't need a reason to actually come along. We try to create a big, welcoming house. I think Scott has been to our centre. We've just tried to create that it feels okay—that you can walk in that door and you don't need a reason to be there. Then the next person will be told. You can come in and you can get a cup of tea. There's always someone smiling. Someone will chat if you need a chat.

It's just creating that soft entry and then, from there, we would try to say, "This is what we offer", or "These other groups are available in that community." I think sometimes it's that people need just to feel that they're seen, that they can be heard and that they've got a safe place, and can say, "Yes, I can come here and sit." People will come. They don't necessarily want to be part of a program as such. They may not have that interest. But they can come in and they can sit and colour in all day or they can just sit where there's human contact. For us, it's very important that we're creating that space for people to feel that they belong and not necessarily think that they need to come in and then we'll funnel you off to a program. It's on that individual level.

The CHAIR: Ms Lanigan, you were talking about migrant groups or programs in your particular area. Is that right?

JACKIE LANIGAN: As I said, yes, I am a migrant support worker. We have English tuition, and bubs and toddlers' programs. Actually, just for a moment, we also have what we call a decaf, which is a dementia cafe which happens each week.

The CHAIR: I read about that, yes.

JACKIE LANIGAN: It's just fabulous because it's for people who are suffering with memory loss and their carers. It's run by volunteers. They are, in the main, retired nurses, so they've got that empathy and also that clinical experience of how to balance out some situations. We also actually have a youth volunteer who's looking into going through to become an aged-care worker, so it brings this wonderful mix of young and old. They have a morning tea, they play games like Scrabble and they've had other activities where they've created little pot plants and things like that. They also enjoy the community garden that our neighbourhood centre has. On really nice days, they move around out there. I think one of the good things about it for the carer as well is sometimes the carer comes on their own if the person who isn't so well is being looked after by another service. It gives them a little bit of respite. That's what we do in that space.

The CHAIR: It's really interesting to hear about the garden because yesterday we had evidence from research about the importance of nature in dealing with loneliness. The research is astounding about how important it was to get outside, so it's really interesting to hear about the garden that you have there.

JACKIE LANIGAN: Also, with English tuition, when it's a nice day the tutor and the students will actually go out in the garden and have the lesson there, which is a really good use of it as well.

The CHAIR: Even anecdotally, do people come in and say that they're feeling lonely or isolated or do they come in and ameliorate the feeling of being lonely? Do people come in and talk about it, or is it more of a thing that you understand is part of the reason that they're there?

FRAN STEAD: It's a real mixed bag. Some people will just start that conversation. I think it's a really brave thing to do to just open up a door and go in and say. Some people will then come and say, "My doctor said to come along to you guys." Then they'll be more happy to tell you their story because they think that it's been an authority that has given them that leeway—or someone at Centrelink or services or the hospital. Then other people will just come in and bring someone and say, "My neighbour's at home and they don't do anything. What can I show them that you do?" Then they might come in and say, "My neighbour told me what you do." You meet people where they are. We just say, "You don't need a reason. This is what we've got." They just arrive.

KAREN PEARSON: Every day I see a group of people who come into our centre. They're there at nine o'clock when we open. We get donations from Woolworths and SecondBite, which is Coles. They sit there for two hours on the pretence of getting some bread or some produce. I recognise myself in them because, if it wasn't for my work, this would be the place that I would come. I don't fit into a bucket or a program. I don't have those interests. If there is a place that you can just walk into so that you can voice yourself to other people, then that would be it. Like I said, I see it every day. They sit and they socialise. They might have a cup of soup or a tea or whatever—do their artwork or whatever it is. Every day we see that.

The CHAIR: That's very interesting and another link back to some evidence we heard yesterday about social prescribing. We were trying to get to the bottom of what it looked like, but you've just given us a really clear example that sometimes a doctor will say, "There's a community centre. Go and see what they do there," or "This is what they do." So thank you—that was also really helpful in the context of yesterday's evidence.

FRAN STEAD: I think that works. That goes on how your community is, though. I think that probably wouldn't work in every community. It would also then depend on what networks your neighbourhood centre has also built up over time. Some doctors will know exactly what we would offer the community. I think that's when you're pivotal in that community through day to day or onto a disaster. They just know that you're there because you live there and you know it's going on. Sometimes they'll just send people there because they don't know what else to do with that person but they know that we would somehow try to navigate or find what we can do to assist them.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: One of the concepts I've come across in my conversations, or even my own deliberations, is "camouflage support" or "covert care". We'll use specifically your example, Ms Stead, of the person colouring in. I'm sure they're getting a lot more out of that than a nice picture at the end.

FRAN STEAD: They are.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I wonder if we could touch more on that and how specifically you are able to manage that as your neighbourhood centre in particular.

FRAN STEAD: For us, that girl who colours in, she also suffers with her mental health. This is her safe place. She will be sitting and she's just colouring in, but I think it's that human interaction that she is looking for. She doesn't fit into any other bucket. She's not going to fit into a group. She hasn't got the financial means. She doesn't have the licence or anything else that she can expand on a lot of things, so we become her safe place. The admin girls—she'll do a colouring in and she'll just give that to someone and then, while you're doing that, she'd be talking. For her in particular, we know her cats are her everything, so when we're getting something from Woolworths or Coles or something—I remember it was just this tiny cat toy and we thought, "Kylie's going to love that." We just gave that to the reception girls and the next time when she came in, they said, "We've got you this." She matters. She actually matters. That's where it becomes that important thing. No-one's sitting with her by the hand every single day. We're just creating that space. You have people around that table where that is their interaction. They then get to know who the staff are.

Yesterday I walked through and she's like, "Hey Fran." I was just going to get a cup of tea. That's when it re-cements as to why we do what we do, when you see how you matter to those guys. Another example: There was a man. He's totally on his own. He comes in every single day. He had been to the doctor's and had got some really bad news that he'd had lung cancer. The first place he came to was to us to say, "You're not going to see me

for five weeks because I've just got lung cancer and I've got to get radiation. I'm going to be going to Orange every single day." It was like, "Okay, thank you. We'll check in with you. Let us know." That's when you realise what that place means to your community. He had no-one else. He straightaway came to us to tell us that news whereas, for us, we would go to our family or anything else. It's that place. People feel safe. They want to tell the people around them who actually have taken an interest in their life. That's massive.

The CHAIR: Parkes, did you have anything wanted to say about that covert care?

DIANNE SCOTT: Just coming into reception—we were talking in the car coming over. Mavis and Lyn were both saying that our reception team are really so friendly. I think that is that welcoming space: They feel safe and we're trusted. I think that's a big thing in the community, that we're trusted to provide referrals or support where we can.

The CHAIR: We heard Mrs Pengilly talk about loneliness. Do people come in and talk about it, or is it something because you have a relationship over time?

DIANNE SCOTT: Yes, I think it's more a trust thing. I think that trust has to be built, but I'm not a front—what would you call it?

FRAN STEAD: Front of house?

DIANNE SCOTT: Yes. So I probably don't get to see that. But definitely over time people would reveal things about themselves, for sure.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can I come to Mrs Moon and Mrs Pengilly? Sorry, if this is getting too close, just shaft it along somehow. We are hearing different cohorts are more susceptible to loneliness. One of those cohorts is regional people and one of them is the older age group. You're certainly regional people. I wonder if you could share why you think those cohorts are particularly susceptible to loneliness, through your own experience, and your friends' and colleagues'?

MAVIS MOON: I was very lonely. I lost my husband and then my two sisters, and I was sort of lost. I lived by myself and my friends told me about the neighbourhood centre. I started to go there, and I have really come out of myself. I enjoy the outings, and they're so very nice to me. They make you welcome, and it's like a family. They're very nice.

The CHAIR: Do you think that's the general experience? I think Mr Barrett was talking about country areas or more rural areas. Do you think there's more of a need for that kind of thing—for somewhere to go?

MAVIS MOON: I think there is because there are a lot of lonely people in our age group. We're all getting older, and you want the company.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Did you want to add anything, Mrs Pengilly?

LYN PENGILLY: I can say a few more words. I have volunteered at the neighbourhood centre for many years—probably about 25, I think. Everything that goes on there—I knew what was happening and what happens. It was a lovely place to volunteer, and I got on well with everybody that worked there, I think. My experience doing that has encouraged me to go along and join in with all of those sorts of things so that I'm not lonely. I think lots of people don't really talk about being lonely. I've got lots of friends, and I've listened to what you've been saying. They don't actually come and say, "I feel lonely." They're not saying that, but you can sort of tell that they are by the way they speak.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: We've heard evidence of the dual benefit of our clubs and organisations that people are volunteering for. I will come to you, Ms Pearson. What is one of the reasons people are volunteering to be part of these groups? Is there an actual benefit that that, in itself, is a shield against loneliness?

KAREN PEARSON: Yes. I guess it's just the social connectedness. I'm not part of any groups or anything, but I do know that if it wasn't for work—I'm also transport disadvantaged; I don't know how to drive. In a rural community, I think that if I didn't have my work then I would be searching out not groups, as such, but places like that, yes.

FRAN STEAD: We started as volunteers.

KAREN PEARSON: I did start as a volunteer at the neighbourhood centre, true.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: We have heard a number of people say that yes. Some people volunteer because that, in itself, is that social interaction that they're craving.

KAREN PEARSON: Yes, definitely.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: You did open up another thing about not being able to drive. The experience of not being able to drive in Cowra would be very different to the experience of not being able to drive in Newtown because of trains, the wonderful metro and all of these sorts of things we have in Sydney.

KAREN PEARSON: Exactly, yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I wonder if you could talk on how big a disadvantage it is, not being able to drive in a regional area.

KAREN PEARSON: Lately, I see it's growing as a bigger and bigger disadvantage. We have shops closing down. We have your services clubs, your bowling clubs and stuff like that but, for me, there is very little, without going out of town. We do have a local cinema—it's at the civic centre—that you can go along to. But, other than that, for me, there's not much else in Cowra. I don't go down the main street unless I have to. Unless I'm looking for something, there's not a lot down there for me anymore. I'm basically work to home, and that's what I do five days a week. Also, socialising—I don't know if there is a stigma, but you feel like there is a stigma to going out alone. For example, I recently did go out on my own. I thought, "I've got to get myself out of this house", and I went down to the local bowling club. I sat at a seat on my own, and there was an elderly gentleman at another seat and he said to me, "Come over and sit with me. I'm on my own too." I did. We introduced each other and, slowly, that table filled up with these elderly gentlemen. I had a lovely afternoon, and I'm going back to socialise with those guys.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: That's a lovely story.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: Mrs Pengilly, something that you said sparked an interest. You said there are people you know that you can see are lonely but who perhaps can't see that or are reluctant to accept that and are probably not participating in neighbourhood centre programs. Do you have a sense of why that might be at all? Have you ever spoken to any of your friends?

LYN PENGILLY: For some people, it's just that they don't like to go out. I don't know why they don't like to go out. They just go and do their shopping and that's it. They don't like to socialise. That's basically it, I think. They just don't like to mix with lots of other people, basically.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: Just with the neighbourhood centres, what is the main initial point of contact between centres and clients? How do you draw them into your programs when it's clear that they're in need?

FRAN STEAD: It's how a neighbourhood centre connects itself to the community. I think a lot of it is word of mouth and social media. We've been there for 40 years. It is when you're out and about. We're constantly out telling people what we do. We are making sure that, wherever we go—doctors' surgeries, hospitals, food hall, schools et cetera—they know what we do. I think, for us, it's that constant trying to remind people that we are here. For us, people may need one of the services. We offer a hub, so a lot of the visiting services also—we really encourage people. We offer that space. So we're getting a lot of the outreach services as well to come. They may have a client that is just coming in, for example, for hearing, and they didn't know what we actually offered the community. It's that sense that when they're actually coming through they look around and go—we've deliberately put our visiting services into our main centre so then there's those other people who are walking through and saying, "I didn't know that this was here." I think it's making yourself visible.

Loneliness—you can't market it as a program, because it's not a program. When you were saying people don't want to say they are lonely—when you say, "I'm a lonely person", it makes you sound like you're a sad person or there's something wrong with you. I think, for us, SecondBite, Woolworths—that's been an amazing drawcard because people have sort of started—you see people tiptoe in. They would run in to get maybe a loaf of bread or they send their children in, and they get a little bit further in that door.

We might be a little bit different to Parkes, where you were saying a lot of your clients are aged, that are experiencing that. And that's where it's community. Each community will be different. Our table that we would have full every day, it's just filled with different ages. Even though we offer playgroups and family support et cetera, we've still got a single mum with two babies in her pram. We are her safe haven when she's craving that adult connection and that extra person to fuss over her children. It just sort of gives her that five minutes that she can talk and be an adult at a table instead. Karen's right. We have lots of people, and it's that one stop that then you can give those referrals or encourage people to join a program.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: I'm from Sydney, and there are great social connected programs being run in my local government area by neighbourhood centres. I see so much effort go into it. But sometimes I wonder if the uptake is just not as great as I would have assumed it would be, and I don't think it's because there is no prevalence of loneliness where I'm at, or social isolation. I just wonder what the impediment is. Is it social anxiety? Is it cynicism? Is it not seeing the need? How do you crash through?

The CHAIR: Can I just add to that? One of the other submissions—I can't remember which one; there's been a few—talks about reaching in to this. We talking about reaching in and reaching out, but people won't always reach out. I know how well connected neighbourhood centres are. I wonder what reaching in looks like, as opposed to expecting people to reach out.

FRAN STEAD: It's a shame, and it might be an exercise for other neighbourhood centres. For ours, it's exactly that. We don't sit and wait for people just to come in. When they're coming in, they feel welcome. They've got that spot. That's where it's really important for us to get out into our community. It's when you know your community, you just start having those conversations with people. That's just the thing. You just get up the street. You know where the people go. We might sit down at Coles and just have that chat to people coming in and out. "Did you know?" You can just sit there, and just a smiling face will make people stop. We just get out there. You can't sell a secret. That's exactly what it is—you cannot.

The CHAIR: That's a good line.

FRAN STEAD: I always remember that from real estate: You cannot sell a secret. The more visible we are in the community—people now start to recognise that logo. That's when you just become cemented in the community. It's on social media as well. People will go, "Oh, go to the neighbourhood centre." It can be a hindrance, but for every little thing, "Oh, go to the neighbourhood centre. They will know." We just make that effort and think, "Okay, how do we fix that?" Or people tag you in different things. Ours is locals supporting locals. We live and breathe it. I think that's the important thing.

The CHAIR: Ms Lanigan, would you like to comment?

JACKIE LANIGAN: You were asking how within the community you let people know about neighbourhood centres. We have a Bathurst interagency, and all the different agencies around the community come once a month, and they're all able to share what they're doing and what programs they're offering. They have guest speakers. That's a great way for people to know what's happening around. We also do an interview fortnightly on community radio and we talk about what programs are happening. We encourage people, if it's not for them, to think about their families, their children, their neighbours that may want to participate in the program. We do lots of things like what Fran's saying as well, using social media and word of mouth. We've got a big noticeboard outside, which I think smaller communities still do. I see people standing there looking at them. What you were saying about the lack of numbers for participating in programs, it's such a hard job. We're always working at trying to get the numbers and encouraging people to come along.

I think there are a lot of complexities to it. There's everything from the cost of living, lack of transport—when I say cost of living, I meant the parents are all working and sometimes it's hard to get the children to these activities. I also think the pandemic has played a big role in the increase of anxiety for young people as well as old because they just weren't able to move around. They had to have groceries delivered to their homes. I think some of that has kind of lingered, and we have to try to reduce the loneliness and socialisation by just increasing our ability to reach out to the community and engage them. In order to do that, in all honesty, I think if we had more funding we'd be able to focus on that rather than scrabbling around for little programs and funding that is often time limited to deliver. Those are some of the issues and complexities of it.

The CHAIR: Mrs Moon, you said that you had the centre recommended to you. How well known do you think the activities are of the centre? Do people know about it?

MAVIS MOON: I think they do now. When I go to the lunches, about 40 people go to the lunches. I also have two meals delivered a week, and I look forward to that. The meals are really beautiful. I was getting that I wasn't cooking for myself, and I really look forward to the meals. The delivery ladies are very nice and friendly.

The CHAIR: So you think it's quite well known?

MAVIS MOON: Yes, it is.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: Obviously there is the funding challenge, and governments perhaps could play a bigger role in that. Other than the funding challenge, are there other things governments can do to help the awareness pitch with the broader community and the delivery of your programs? Hypothetically, could the medical profession take a broader to approach to patients that come into them, and have neighbourhood centres in mind and make broader referrals in that regard? Can you see a space for government, past funding, that might make your jobs just that little bit easier and help with the awareness gap that might exist?

FRAN STEAD: Each community is different. Loneliness doesn't fit into—you can't make it a program. It's not a program. It's meeting communities where they are, whether they're aged or—you need to look at each community. When we look at that in regards to funding, each of those programs—they're neighbourhood centres

or community centres—are very specific in regards to outcomes and KPIs, and they're all tied to funding. When we look at that part for loneliness and where people fit, there's sort of this little area that everyone can refer people to that, but I think it all ties to funding. You're not even looking at lots of funding. There has to be that core funding model so that people can just create spaces, and medical centres or health or Meals on Wheels or whatever, and refer people to an area.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: So at the moment it's program specific?

FRAN STEAD: Yes, each program is different. Like anything we're talking about around loneliness and creating these spaces, we're not funded to actually—or the neighbourhood centre as such is not funded. We rely on donations. We rely on generating an income ourselves to actually fund this part. We're funded—State, Federal, local—to run specific programs, but that very vital part that is people's wellbeing, that is not funded at all, and the demand just gets bigger and bigger. We are not scratching for numbers. It's sort of like, "Wow, how do we turn people away?" We have waitlists to come to events, to groups. That's not an issue for us. I think that's because of where we're situated regionally. It may be different for the city. You can't even go to a big centre to sit and people watch. We don't have that. We are it, but then that's an extra demand. We become that one-stop shop and we've got doctors there. We all know how vital it is for people's wellbeing, but I think you have to look at them both together. How long can we sustain that? We rely very heavily on our local council. We're in a council building; they're giving us that rent for donations. We're relying on those councillors voting to continue that. If that changed, what we would be able to deliver changes.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: Presumably, there's the administrative burden of constantly applying.

FRAN STEAD: Yes, constantly, and you can't long-term plan for anything. We're just reliant. If you rent a room to someone, then you're thinking, "Okay, well, they've only got funding for a year." When we're saying we're renting a room, we'd be renting them that room for $50 a day. You might have one room that you're rent out once a week. You get $50 and you might only have that for a year. That doesn't go—it's that constant pressure of having more people aware and more people sent to us. It's, "What do we do with the people?" Someone has to do something and we're not an outreach service. You also find that outreach services, at their end of their day, that's it; they're done. They've seen their people; they're off. We're still left with people.

The CHAIR: Because we're talking about a global response, the question was, "What can governments do?" We've heard the funding piece, and I absolutely hear you on that, and of course we had evidence yesterday and the submissions. Mr Yasmut, you also wanted to add to that?

CAN YASMUT: Yes. I would like to add the notion that community development is a practice that can be applied to programs. It can be applied to government practices as well, and even here, having a round table is an opportunity to make it much more inviting and applying some kind of democratic equality principles into everything we do. The point you were touching on is: How do you attract people? What might be some of the impediments and why are people not coming? When we gave evidence yesterday, one point we were trying to make is that the social infrastructure provided is one thing, but the community engagement and the community building piece is another. To have people owning their solutions, having a part in designing the programs, engaging community at every step, so to speak, of the solution, just creates a sense of empowerment, a sense of belonging, but it also sends them a sense of ownership going forward.

If you are part of something in making it happen, the question "Why don't you come?" would never arise because you will come. It is something that you have been part of creating. I think community building is another term that can be used interchangeably here, but building community has that aspect of addressing programs and working with people that want to access those programs. But it has the other aspect of what I think our members—and Fran and also Jackie have been talking about in particular—is that it's building those connections with other stakeholders in the community, whether it's local businesses, whether it's local members, the local clubs, the sports clubs, and schools and so on. I think it's really important to keep in mind that the social infrastructure role of neighbourhood centres is also one of building those connections. It is a very academic term, but it's building the social capital of the community to create those connections between people and institutions and the health services, and so on, and work across.

While this would be probably an inquiry in itself as to what government could do, I think it would be worth noting here that in addition to any funding recognition, it would be a policy recognition that community development actually matters, and that community building is a way of doing things that has to happen locally. It is currently being carried out by over 175 neighbourhood centres across New South Wales as a network. Therein, I think, you have the opportunity to actually get a statewide picture. I heard this term in Canada: It's like from twinkle to wrinkle. If anyone is offended by that, I apologise, but I thought it was very cute to think about it as a whole of life span issue. Loneliness, natural disasters—as we were discussing yesterday—and crises like the pandemic, they affect people from all ages and from all walks of life. I would like to conclude by saying here that

there is a sadness to it. We've heard it from our community members that are here today, and we've heard it from the other testimonies: We have to build a community, because community is actually deteriorating.

The community, even as I knew it as a child or as a young person when I grew up, has changed considerably whether it's through social media or the fast-paced environment that we live in. All of those things affect young people equally to older people that are lonely. We create community then with nursing homes or old people's homes where we have to re-create what once was community. That takes effort and that takes time. To recognise that, and that we can play a role in that would be wonderful.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can we just get Ms Lanigan on that as well, because you were quite specific in your submission about the need for some core funding. I just wonder if you could spend a bit of time on what support you need and why.

JACKIE LANIGAN: I will say that funding and numbers and things like that isn't my area of expertise, but what I experienced is we get funded—it's all just program funding. Often it takes a lot of time and administration to apply for the funding, and often we don't hear back whether we've got it. We're left with a very short time frame to deliver the program, so that makes it quite challenging for planning and promoting. Therefore, you're reducing the number of participants, potentially. Sometimes those programs will finish. Things change and then you're starting from scratch again, and you have to keep applying and applying. You don't know, so there's a certain amount of uncertainty with that, I find. If there was core funding, we would be better able to deliver the programs that we are actually funded for because we'd have that in the background, knowing that we have some stability and the ability to continue without that stress that comes with that, if that makes sense.

The CHAIR: Yes, and it reflects the evidence we took from some other community centres yesterday as well. I have two questions as we wind up. One is to Ms Lanigan again, because you touched on the dementia cafe, but I'd like to know a bit more about that. My next question is to Ms Pearson. I see that your job title or your role is compliance officer, and I'm a bit intrigued about that in a community centre setting. Maybe if I could hear about the dementia cafe and then about compliance, that would be great.

JACKIE LANIGAN: We provide a space to reduce the isolation and increase the social connections for both the carer and the loved ones. It's not a respite service or an alternative care arrangement. It's just like an everyday normal setting that's surrounded by all the usual activities. They've got people coming and going, so they're not isolated within the centre, so to speak. It was started a few years ago by a group of volunteers. As I said earlier, the ladies that run it are nurses. The people just come each week. They're associated with the Dementia Alliance. I don't actually run the dementia cafe, so I'm not sure how they connected with them. But Bathurst as a community has wanted to increase awareness of dementia, so they have these monthly meetings which are actually held at the neighbourhood centre. It's people in mental health awareness positions. They do come from the hospital. They come from other organisations as well. That's a sort of offshoot of us being known for this dementia cafe.

The CHAIR: Is that one of those activities that is incidental, or is there specific funding to do that?

JACKIE LANIGAN: No, there's no funding.

The CHAIR: So it's one of those that we've been talking about and hearing about. It's one of those things where there was a need, someone thought this was a good idea, and so you do it.

JACKIE LANIGAN: Yes.

The CHAIR: A great example of that, thank you. Ms Pearson?

KAREN PEARSON: Compliance.

The CHAIR: Compliance officer.

KAREN PEARSON: Yes. We're an NDIS registered provider. We're aged care. We've got the Australian Service Excellence Standards, WHS, HR.

The CHAIR: The whole range.

KAREN PEARSON: The standards to comply to. So I am the compliance officer for all of those standards.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. I was intrigued, but that makes complete sense. I just want to quickly check in with my colleagues online and hear if there are any other things they want to explore or ask about.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I thank everyone, but I'd love to give Mrs Moon and Mrs Pengilly the final say. Maybe you need a second to think on it. This is almost your direct line to the Premier. What would you

like him to hear out of this Committee? What's something that he can do that would make a genuine difference to you, and those like you, living in communities such as Parkes? In this space, obviously.

MAVIS MOON: Probably more funding to help them out.

LYN PENGILLY: Yes, more funding.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: More funding, you think? We do appreciate the effort it's taken everyone to come across.

The CHAIR: Absolutely.

Mr CLAYTON BARR: It's nearly an hour from everywhere they've come.

The CHAIR: We very much do. I want to conclude this round table by exactly reflecting that comment. We very much appreciate you taking the time to come along. We also really appreciate the work that you do in the community. I want you to know that we've heard the issues that you've raised with us, and we'll take that into consideration when we're doing our report and our internal advocacy around that as we continue to do work on this and other issues. But I also want to say thank you—I have left this morning with two new sayings. One is "can't sell a secret" and the other is "twinkle to wrinkle". I feel like I have left well equipped. Thank you again for being here today. We appreciate it.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mrs STEPHANIE ROBINSON, Chief Executive Officer, Lifeline Central West, sworn and examined

Ms ZOE EVANS, General Manager, Wellways New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory and Queensland, affirmed and examined

Ms DENISE WATMORE, Regional Manager, Wellways Western New South Wales, affirmed and examined

Mr ANDREW GREIG, LEUT, RAN (Ret.), Coordinator, Bellum Est (formerly Western PTSD Support), affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome, and thank you for making the time to be here today to give evidence to the Committee. We very much appreciate you being here. I did hear someone say it can be a little bit intimidating. Please, this is just the gear. Really, just pretend it's all not here and we're just having a discussion about something that you guys are experts on. We're actually really pleased to have you here to share that with us, so please be as relaxed as you possibly can in a really artificial situation. We'll start with any opening statements that you'd like to make before we get to questions. I might start with Mrs Robinson.

STEPHANIE ROBINSON: Lifeline Central West covers a huge reach of about 400,000 kilometres of rural New South Wales. I am very happy to be here today. I have given my life to working in community, and what I see more and more is that there is a widening disconnect. We're more connected with technology, but connection seems something that is becoming more and more problematic despite all the advances we've had in technology. My title might say CEO. You rarely find me behind my desk. I get out there and do a lot of the hands-on work because I think that it's incredibly important to have that influencing the direction of our organisation.

We work across all different demographics, from young people right to older people, and nobody is immune from the impacts of loneliness. The reality is we all have mental health. Since COVID we've been able to give more attention, and some of the stigma around that has diminished. However, I echo some of the points that your previous people have raised. There is a constant state for us of uncertainty and instability in what we do. Again, that does boil down to the dirty "f-word" that everybody talks about, which is funding. It definitely is a barrier for organisations to work collaboratively together. I think that's something that's really important and needs to be raised. The other point is just also often loneliness is spoken about as something that—again, you can be in a crowded room and feel lonely. So it's something that needs to be looked at not with just a health lens; it needs to be something of all of community, all the social impacts, and really holistically.

Together, we have incredible knowledge and resources in how to do this, but we've got to get better at getting serious bang for our buck for our funding dollar. I think it's a really difficult system to navigate—it is for those who work in this field. I can't imagine how difficult it would be for people who are seeking our services. So, some really strategic work in how we can all work better together and get the most out of the scarce funding dollar that we all seek and, again, that base level of funding so we can operate and get out of operating out of scarcity, and being able to be future focused rather than just constantly having to put out spot fires. I think it would be incredibly important to look at different ways of doing that. Thank you for your time.

ZOE EVANS: We really welcome the opportunity to present here today. It was really interesting popping in to the end of the previous people and hearing their stories. I think what we would really love to talk about is the profound impacts of loneliness and social isolation in New South Wales communities. We know that loneliness is far too common. It can affect anybody and really has a significant impact on people's physical and mental health. What we see so often in our work is that loneliness and social isolation can indeed lead to quite complex mental health concerns. The people that we support have often lost connection to family and their community. It was something that we really identified with the previous speakers as well. Sometimes that isolation and stigma can really lead to barriers to people even going to the supermarket where often you just have those formal interactions and connections with people. It can happen for a whole number of reasons. Often what we've found really is that it is, for a lot of the people we support, associated with stigma, stereotyping of mental illness and discrimination. That really can contribute to people feeling unsafe in their communities and therefore socially withdrawing.

As Denise and I mentioned, we are from Wellways. We do cover this vast region of New South Wales. Previously, before my role as general manager, I was a regional manager from Murrumbidgee. Denise and I are very intrinsically connected via borders and probably experiences as well. What we find, whether it's in the metro or regional areas, in the work that we do walking alongside people is that loneliness and social isolation really is becoming an increasing issue. We believe that connection is essential to a person's recovery journey, whether it's supporting people through psychosocial programs, such as our Community Living Supports program; or our housing and accommodation support programs that we deliver here in western New South Wales, and also the

Murrumbidgee up through rural northern New South Wales as well; or our suicide prevention and aftercare programs. Certainly, through those suicide prevention and aftercare programs, we're starting to see an increase in loneliness coming through in referrals for people that have found themselves experiencing distress that has led to suicide attempts or crises.

Also, our Carer Gateway program—we provide carer Gateway in parts of New South Wales. What we see there is carers very much feeling isolated. They prioritise the care of their loved ones, and sometimes that means that they're not actually getting to connect with people that they need to connect with. Probably like everybody else, our solution is the "f-word". Not only funding, but I think the length of terms of funding. We know that recovery doesn't happen overnight. It's not this really linear process. Often the work that we do takes time, so length of funding is really important to us so we can really build those relationships with the people that we support and encourage them to be able to connect with others. I think what we see sometimes when that funding isn't stable and we're transitioning to other providers, people start to fall through the gaps and that has a long-lasting impact on their mental illness. We would really love to thank the Committee for inviting us to speak today and for your investment in understanding the impacts of loneliness in New South Wales.

ANDREW GREIG: I've gone a little bit more structured, if that's alright. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I come before you as a lived-experience subject-matter expert, offering a perspective shaped by direct engagement with the challenges of loneliness and the organisations working to address it. Loneliness is a complex and multifaceted issue spanning social, emotional and existential dimensions. Research highlights the strong link between loneliness and mental health, with social isolation both contributing to and resulting from psychological distress. We also know that loneliness carries significant economic and social costs, placing strain on healthcare systems, reducing workforce participation and weakening community cohesion.

Addressing it requires a broad approach, and one which considers the financial burden on the State, the role of government and community in mitigating these effects and the structural barriers preventing effective solutions from taking root. One of these barriers, to my mind, is the challenge faced by the very organisations that you've been listening to working to foster social connection. These charities, NFPs and grassroots initiatives are well placed to support people at risk of loneliness, but they often struggle with governance, compliance and financial sustainability. Without adequate support, promising initiatives fail before they can make an impact, and existing organisations face unnecessary inefficiencies that limit their reach.

I believe a government supported advisory service for the not-for-profit sector, similar to the Business Connect model, would help address these challenges by providing guidance on governance, finance and strategic planning. This initiative would ensure that community-led solutions are more sustainable, that funding reaches frontlines rather than being lost in administrative burdens and that collaboration is encouraged where it is the best path forward. Importantly, this would not compete with existing funding structures but rather strengthen the sector as a whole, allowing organisations to be more effective in tackling loneliness and its broader societal impacts.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. We appreciate all of that. I know a bit about Lifeline—we heard from the central organisation yesterday—and I've read Mr Greig's submission, but I don't know so much about Wellways. You were talking about the things you do, and I wonder if very briefly, before we get to substantive questions—for my benefit and with my apologies—if you could explain a little bit more about Wellways?

ZOE EVANS: Sure. We're a national organisation that pretty much operates up and down the eastern seaboard, from Tassie to northern Queensland. Our primary focus is around mental health and disability support. We have a very, very strong focus on lived experience. That is core to the work that we do. In actual fact, I think around 75 per cent of our staff across those States identify as having a lived experience of either mental illness or as a carer of somebody with. We don't have clinical services. A lot of our services are very much psychosocial based, supporting people through our recovery model that includes the individual, the family and the community.

How we work in the community and how we support families is really integral to the work that we do. We have, probably, a range of programs from residential programs for young people and adults, suicide prevention and post-prevention programs and mental health psychosocial programs through a step-up step-down kind of model. We're very diverse, probably depending on the region in which we operate. I think that's probably one of our strengths. We are able to lean into what's happening in those local communities and what's relevant for them. That helps us determine what our funding looks like and what our programs look like. We try to be very responsive and not try to put a square peg into a round hole. Predominantly, it is mental health recovery disability support.

The CHAIR: Are you affiliated with any other organisation? Are you a religious organisation? You're not a neighbourhood centre. I'm just trying to get a sense of—

ZOE EVANS: No, we're not a neighbourhood centre and we're not affiliated with any other religious or charity organisations.

The CHAIR: So you're a standalone—

ZOE EVANS: We are.

The CHAIR: Standalone but across a big geography. I did want to go to ask Mr Greig a question. Your organisation seems like it does a really amazing job, but it is quite particular with regards to PTSD. I wondered if you could speak a bit more about the connections between suffering PTSD and the experience of isolation and loneliness. We haven't had that perspective in particular.

ANDREW GREIG: Sure. At first, I'll reiterate that I have lived experience. Whilst that comes with certain benefits for this, I'm very cognisant of the fact that that should ethically limit me to not discuss the clinical aspects of things, regardless of what my knowledge in that may be. I try to remain really cognisant of the fact that people with lived experience can often become quite expert in depth—as opposed to breadth. You should try to remain objective and pragmatic and look out for that echo chamber. I could talk ad nauseam about the relationship between PTSD and isolation. There's not a single category of PTSD that doesn't link in with a mental health symptom that is closely related to PTSD, according to DSM-5 and reiterated by NSW Health. It's important to identify, though, that loneliness and PTSD, and loneliness and the symptoms of PTSD such as avoidance that would cause loneliness, work reciprocally. One fosters the other. They feed into each other and they keep going.

Probably, for me, a great takeaway about PTSD and the lessons I have learnt in PTSD is the relations that a lot of the symptoms have with people who don't suffer PTSD. For example, there is a strong commonality between DSM-5 PTSD criterion C—avoidance—and generation Z. The 18- to 24-year-olds have overtaken the elderly as the greatest sufferers of loneliness. They suffer often through their avoidant tendencies, which is similar to the predominance of PTSD people. PTSD sufferers engage in avoidance because—there are multiple reasons.

Say you're a first responder and you worked in your community and now you have PTSD. Now you go to the shops and you're surrounded by a multitude of stimuli that can cause a reaction that is out of your control. You're going to avoid that. Avoidance works in the short term and that makes it a really appetising approach, which causes its own spiral which causes what we would call loneliness. But for gen Z, I believe our social structure now is, more than ever, fostering avoidant behaviour. Or, if you want to be a little bit more cynical but I think accurate, elements degrading societal structure are enforcing avoidant behaviour and encouraging avoidance. Probably the best lesson that I could impart or have received from spending so much time with PTSD sufferers and being one myself is that the experience, whilst faceted and complex on its own, is not unique and lessons can be learnt and applied across the board for this case.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I appreciate that. I've got some other questions, but I wanted to ask Mrs Robinson—I think I used your term in the earlier session because I'd been reading the submissions. It is this concept of reaching in rather than expecting people to reach out. We've just heard about avoidance. We often hear or read that if you're lonely or isolated, then you need to reach out and do something—join a group or whatever. But that is sometimes beyond the capability of the person experiencing it. Can you talk a bit more about this idea of reaching in rather than expecting reaching out?

STEPHANIE ROBINSON: Certainly. I guess the idea of that came from my own lived experience around some of these issues. As somebody who also has a diagnosis of PTSD and depression, it is something that you hear constantly. It used to be something that I certainly didn't share with people. Still, in my position, I would hear the commentary around, "Reach out. There are all these services. Pick up the phone. Call Lifeline." We see from the number of people who do reach out to services such as Lifeline—and we're talking about 4,000 a day these days—there are many, many more who don't do that. For me, what I found, and then around my own observations of people, it actually added extra pressure. You might be feeling low and wanting to avoid. However, it doesn't matter if there are all these services out there when you're in that place. What you actually need is somebody that will reach in rather than adding an expectation on the person suffering to reach out.

I've now been with Lifeline 10 years and have always valued the 24/7 crisis service, which I think is incredible. It absolutely saves lives. But working on the ground, what I see is that all the answers lie in community. We are all involved, whether it be just the supermarket we go to, the pub on the corner that you go to on a Friday night or playing soccer—whatever that might be. There are people that you constantly come into contact with and they get to know your behaviours, who you are and how you act all the time. There is the concept of building capacity in community by training up the gatekeepers—using that terminology—whether you're in an official or unofficial role in a community. You might be the publican. You might be the footy coach. If you give them some skills and knowledge to empower them to be able to act so they don't, we say, miss, dismiss or avoid those signs when somebody is not doing okay, we can really strengthen our safety net.

If I had a dollar for every time we responded to a suicide or a suicide attempt, with people saying, "We did see signs but we didn't want to step into that place. It wasn't our business. We didn't know what to say so we

said nothing at all. I didn't want to make it worse. I actually knew. They told me, 'I'm going to end my life', but I wasn't going to break their confidence." All of those things are not helpful. When people are given the knowledge and also the confidence to be able to have some challenging conversations, we see that it saves lives. I've got dozens of stories giving examples of that. Often it's done from somebody that is known and trusted and often it's a simple reflection of what they've noticed. Instead of Scott going to the pub every Friday night and him normally being there with mates, for example, all of a sudden Scott's turning up every night to the pub and he's starting to turn up on his own, and that's something to notice. It's a change in behaviour.

If we can go, "Mate, I've seen you're here a fair bit. What's going on?" in a conversational way, he's likely to go, "Somebody has noticed me. Somebody does care. They've seen me." That can be incredibly validating for somebody. Then it might be that he chooses to share. Or he may go, "What are you—no", and they're like, "Mate, I'm here behind the bar every day and I've seen you. I just want you to know that, if you want to have a catch-up afterwards, I'm here", or, "Who can I get? You're usually here with Jonno. How about we get him?" Or, if he does disclose that, "Yes, I'm really struggling, blah, blah, blah", it's not up to them to fix it.

It's like being a first aider. There isn't an expectation for you to diagnose or manage someone's heart condition forever, do their rehabilitation and monitor their diet or whatever. It's the same with mental health first aid and stepping into this space. It's about putting the offer out there but then being able to connect them with appropriate support. It might be simple things that already exist in community. It might be sitting down and going, "Wow, that sounds really big. I don't know what to do with that. Let's pick up the number and we'll call together." They're simple steps, and that reaching in can just be a real game changer. It takes the pressure away from the person that is in that position. That's what I was trying to say when I use that terminology.

The CHAIR: Thank you, I appreciate that. As I said, it did make an impact on me. I'm sorry and I don't mean to cut anyone short, but we have a limited amount of time and I know that my colleagues will not be happy with me if I don't let them ask questions as well.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I have a series of questions, but I'll try to rattle through as quickly as I can. Mr Greig, I believe you were involved in starting your NFP. Was that easy?

ANDREW GREIG: No, it wasn't. There were significant hurdles.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Which I guess comes to the recommendation you made to try to help with some of the governance, compliance and financial sustainability, you said. How important do you think it is that we have these organisations like yours, and provide this support so we have a broader spectrum of these organisations?

ANDREW GREIG: To that, more is not better. More appropriate and promising services that are well funded and that can execute their goals and that can streamline their finances and create bigger bang for buck for the Government is better. Society has fundamentally changed. One of the questions is talking about what social media could do to change things. Honestly, I think it's a great initiative and, if you come up with recommendations on that, that's fantastic. But I think aiming to change that is tilting at windmills. I'd far prefer to look at creating solutions within the society we live in. I've written up a proposal, which I'd love to share with you for you to read after, if you're interested.

The CHAIR: Certainly. We'll get that tabled afterwards.

ANDREW GREIG: Great, thank you. There have been half attempts in the past. There are a series of provisions provided for these groups, but they're piecemeal and so forth. I think an avenue for streamlining this and creating funding more accessibly without adding more funding to it is a solid initiative. Does that make sense? Does that answer your question?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I think it does, but what would you and the other members of your organisation be leaning on without that very bespoke support group?

ANDREW GREIG: What would we be leaning on funding wise?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: No. As in, as an individual, how would you be handling it?

ANDREW GREIG: There's nothing. I don't think that's an exaggeration. Our hopes and plans are to provide assistance to people who aren't in desperate critical need but in significant need. Prior to us forming four or five years ago now under multiple different structures and fighting to survive, there was nothing. Where we currently sit is—are you familiar with the term "decompensating"? It's someone who is essentially psychologically collapsing. They are at the point where they now need to become an inpatient. We spend the majority of our time postponing that, which is not a solution. It's not a fix and it doesn't help, but we're full. That's where we spend our time. If we could streamline our finances and if we could, like every other organisation, put more cents per dollar

away from admin and towards frontline care, we could go a long way to fixing that. Whether that's the local bridge club or whether that's Wellways, it doesn't matter. It's the same outcome.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Seeing as we have regionally based people here, what are the unique issues, hurdles or dramas we're facing in regional New South Wales when it comes to loneliness? There must be differences that we have here that are unique compared to a metro experience.

STEPHANIE ROBINSON: I think there are a lot of things. I think, when we look at the suicide statistics, we see that we are over-represented in rural areas. I think some of that is the tyranny of distance. I particularly saw it increase, say, in the drought years where things like the cost of fuel, the cost of—nobody had the funds to be able to do what life was before that. Then we went straight into other challenges around COVID, and I think we still haven't recovered from that, to be honest. We do have in many areas—even where we operate out of, technology fails us with the internet, and so there is often disrupted access to telehealth services and things like that. And even phone service for people—phone connection is incredibly important when you live out in the bush. I think that there is stigma in the whole stoic communities and attitudes of particularly men in rural settings, and a reluctance to want to seek help and support.

I think it is again a state of society around children of older people, who are now having to work multiple jobs and more and more jobs. I think that, again, does both ends of it: They're unable to support their parents as they get older, and then it also flows down to the children in that the children are also left not having that support that decades ago they would have had. That is leading them to be able to having more and more time on their devices which, again, is leading into that social media and the toxicity around that, and making kids step into roles that they really are not mentally able to do and the decisions that they need to make and really to fend for themselves a little bit. I think it is an incredibly complex issue. That is the thing that we are noticing around every aspect of our face-to-face counselling and our calls on the crisis line: the complexities of it. That is something that is incredibly relevant and significant to that. Again, for us, loneliness traditionally was always thought of for that older person. However, again, we too are noticing the impact on young people and are certainly having to pivot and pay more attention to that.

The CHAIR: I know there's so much and we have limited time. We appreciate it very much and we have your submission as well, but I think the question was whether we could also get a response from Wellways—my apologies again, Ms Robinson.

ZOE EVANS: I completely agree with Stephanie. I think that they would certainly be things that we identify as being key contributors to loneliness as well. Just building on the complexity, I think some of those things in rural communities is actually they all intersect so that they often aren't things that happen in isolation—somebody lives in a rural setting and doesn't have as much access to a service. The cost-of-living crisis means they can't go to their local hotel as much or they can't get taxis home. I think it's probably the intersection of things that really impact people in rural settings.

Certainly from the services that we provide—stigma. We work with people who have long-term and enduring mental illness and who may hear voices. Often what they feel is that trepidation of going downtown, going to visit somebody or accessing the library, in case they experience some sort of episode, so to speak. And then they're frowned upon and they feel shame and embarrassment, and those sorts of things. I think there's the complexity of all of those intersecting pieces as well as that real stigma that they feel in their communities, with their mental illness.

DENISE WATMORE: I think, as well, because we support places like Walgett and Lightning Ridge, it's that sometimes there is not a big community. You try to connect people back into the community, and it's not there. So we've got to create it or look for it ourselves. The other thing is, previously, you'd go to your doctor's surgery and you'd sit there and you'd chat to the person beside you, or you'd go into your chemist and they'd know you by name. As the bigger organisations or the fly-in fly-out—I think those small communities lose that, so people don't feel validated or important and then they retreat. Once they retreat, they lose the skills to actually be able to communicate or reach out. It is that reaching in, but it's not only reaching in. It's reaching in, but it's stepping beside them to support them on that journey of relearning those skills and re-finding their self-worth, because a lot of people lose that. They don't think they're worthy enough to be part of a community. It really is helping them find that confidence to reach out. In the more remote areas it's a lot more difficult because there's not a lot to pull from or engage in.

The CHAIR: Yes, I hadn't really thought of that. You need enough people and enough activities.

DENISE WATMORE: Yes, you talk about sporting clubs and things and even clubs. A lot of them shut early. A lot of them don't have enough in the community to have teams now. It's just getting smaller and

smaller and more isolated and, as Stephanie said, in the communities like that out there, there's not the transport to take you to the bigger towns.

The CHAIR: Mr Greig, did you want to answer Mr Barrett's question, particularly about the regional or rural?

ANDREW GREIG: Denise has made a really valid point there about the size of communities. To reiterate that and to look at it again through PTSD, which I'm sure has a lot of similarities with a lot of things, it can cause episodes of embarrassment that you personally have stigma on, but society has stigma on it too. One explosive behaviour and you've burnt your bridges with people who used to be your neighbours, and so on and so forth. I deal with a few individuals who are not so much overtly not welcome at their church anymore but not welcome at their church anymore. A church is representative of a third place, religious or non-religious. A religious building is a third place, and that could be the same story for the pub, the bowls club, the—whatever—not to mention that bowls club could be 150 kilometres away.

But you can find yourselves in positions where you've burnt these bridges, whether in your own head through catastrophising or whether in reality. Especially when we're talking about—I don't want to name him—this character of man that we're talking about, and I believe I belong to that group. Depression often embodies itself as outward anger. We don't feel sad; we feel angry, and we aim that at someone and we lose track of reality. We fire off at someone, and now it's their fault. "I don't want to go to that place because he's the chair," or "I don't want to engage there because that's his seat at the bar." It's an odd one, but the lack of anonymity can create further loneliness. Personally, I love the lack of anonymity and I love the accountability. Accountability works both ways, and I love it in a small community. But it can work incredibly detrimentally where you are known and where your grandfather was known.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: With respect to that reciprocal relationship between loneliness and mental health outcomes, do you think if loneliness reduction were better embedded in public health frameworks and workers compensation frameworks and responses, that would be a path to better outcomes on both fronts? Could government be doing a better job with respect to that?

ANDREW GREIG: There are a couple of initiatives around the world that speak to this. I'm not sure if it's England or the United Kingdom, but I believe it's England. The doctors—in England specifically, so not including Scotland and Wales and so forth—are now prescribing community engagement as opposed to going directly medically.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: As a treatment?

ANDREW GREIG: As a treatment. Scotland has a similar program, and New Zealand is doing a medical approach on using whanau-centred approaches. Whanau is their word for what we would call something between a family and a clan. They're engaging the community in bringing someone back into them. There are lots of approaches that we can draw from overseas that have made alterations. None of them are older than about 2015, which is a shame because there is not a huge amount of information we can draw on, but there is data there. That leads me back to having a strategic approach where we can manage to spread our money further—the same money, because more is not coming. We know that. We need to make the money that is coming to us far more effective so we can pursue these things.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: Data collection, better research?

ANDREW GREIG: A statewide strategic approach.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: Yes.

ANDREW GREIG: Yes, because we don't have one.

ZOE EVANS: I'm reflecting on our own funding models. A lot of our funding comes—somebody has to have a diagnosis of moderate mental illness, or long term and enduring. Loneliness doesn't fit into any of those, so I think investment in—it feels weird. The gentleman was here before talking about community development approaches, and how we build community is so important. But when we're looking at, again, funding models, how do you measure whether somebody is lonely or not? I think sometimes it feels like government looks for those outcomes, but I think loneliness is so broad that it doesn't fit into a diagnosis of how we work. It's more of a community wellbeing or an individual wellbeing situation.

Often we find ourselves trying to fit square pegs into round holes when trying to get somebody the support that you know they so desperately need. In our aftercare services, we can work with people for three months following a suicide attempt—three months to work on somebody being socially isolated and walking alongside them isn't enough when you've got these really integral things and these barriers in place that are

contributing to that loneliness. I think that the types of programs that we're funded to deliver and the fact that there is not a lot of wriggle room in them sometimes makes it really challenging to work with people and support them with loneliness.

The CHAIR: Unfortunately, we have come to the end of the session. Thank you for your submissions, for your willingness to be here and for the evidence you have just given. We very much appreciate that and also the work that you do in the community, particularly in rural and regional areas.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Mrs HELEN MILLER, General Manager, In-Home Support Services, Live Better, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome, Mrs Miller, and thank you very much for making the time to come and give evidence today. Do you want to start with a short statement?

HELEN MILLER: Yes, just a short statement to discuss what Live Better does and the number of customers we service across rural and regional New South Wales. We provide community supports to approximately 1,200 aged-care customers and around 500 NDIS customers. We also operate Carer Gateway, which currently has 2,200 active carers for the area that we service. We also provide community transport services across that footprint in New South Wales. We only provide our services in rural, regional and remote locations, so we're very much aware of our customers and their needs, and in particular the impact that loneliness has and also how that is aggravated by the distance that is needed to be travelled by our customers and/or us to go and visit and pick them up.

The CHAIR: I want to start with quite a general question. Obviously, we're out here in Orange to get a perspective on rural and regional experiences of loneliness and isolation. You've just said that you can identify that in your clients. Even if it's quite anecdotal, can you help us understand what that looks like for the people that your organisation works with? What does loneliness and isolation look like for them? And then, perhaps, what does your organisation attempt to do to alleviate that?

HELEN MILLER: I'll look at it in the different areas—for example, in our aged-care area. Obviously, loneliness is something that's impacted more as people get older. The things that we observe very much in that space are that seasonal has a significant impact—Christmastime, for example. If they are disconnected or not as connected with family, it can bring back many memories, perhaps of better times. It can be more exacerbated over that period. The other thing is that obviously, being in Orange, if we just speak about Orange, the winters can be quite cold here. That, I believe, has a significant impact, particularly if we have customers who feel that they're unable to pay for electricity. They may turn their heating off for considerable parts of the day and end up in bed, which just enhances their isolation and their feelings of loneliness.

But some of the contributing factors that we see very much that contribute to an individual's loneliness are things like, obviously, if they are socially isolated, particularly if they live outside of town, or they live outside of small rural communities across our footprint—if they have 20, 25 minutes, half an hour or more to travel into a community setting and they're impacted by their health issues, or they're impacted by mobility, so their ability to be independent has been compromised quite considerably, that will then increase their isolation and therefore their loneliness. It's something that we see quite a bit of.

Interestingly, in our disability space, we do see loneliness as well. Sometimes it's to do with the travel and the distance to get to community settings, but often for them it's around that they're embarrassed or they don't feel comfortable about being in a social setting. They're unsure about where the bathroom might be. They're unsure about a whole variety of things. If they don't have someone with them to support them, they will withdraw from any community connections that they might have.

The one thing that I can say anecdotally across the board is that if you speak—which is what we do. We speak to our customers, and they inevitably will make the comment that they want to be more connected with their communities, particularly if they've been in that area for a long time. They might live on a property. They do have an established community connection that they've had for considerable periods of time. And if for some reason they're unable to connect, whether that be for health issues, mobility or mental health or any other kind of issue that will limit their ability to connect with community, they will feel the loneliness more. But it's certainly something that they will speak about, that they want to feel more connected to their communities.

The CHAIR: You've identified distance as being one of the issues—but also self-censoring around what they think is socially acceptable to say or to ask for?

HELEN MILLER: Yes, particularly those of our customers with a disability who are ageing. We are starting to see, in our disability customers, they're ageing. Obviously, with ageing, there is a known increase of feelings of anxiousness. Often feelings of loneliness can be quite apparent and strong as people get older. If you combine that with a person with a disability who, perhaps, is not as comfortable to be in any community setting, then you do have quite an increased level of isolation. It's certainly something that we see quite a bit of.

The CHAIR: We've heard yesterday and today from community neighbourhood centres, and today we heard from regional ones. Your organisation particularly helps people quite practically to get places and do things. How much are you aware of, or how difficult is it to find out what types of services and activities and things—how do you make connections, or do you make connections for the people that you work with? Do you find out what's going on and suggest things? How is it that they might find out where to get connection?

HELEN MILLER: Most of our communities that we work in have what we call an interagency meeting where there are a number of providers that come together, usually via the councils, and they enable that connection. Obviously, then there are emails as well. They would then distribute any activities that were happening in that local community that would be suitable. From an organisation such as Live Better, what we would do is we would share that information with our coordinators—those that are in direct contact with our customers—to enable them to provide that information to them and link people into the appropriate services. That's very much what we do. We assess all of our customers on their needs, which include social needs, which include how they want to be connected to their community. We then look at ways and work with them to enable them to connect.

The CHAIR: I know a little bit about NDIS plans, and part of an NDIS plan is "What do you need to enable that social connection?" But you service—I'm looking here and you listed a range of different cohorts—

HELEN MILLER: We do.

The CHAIR: —with different funding aspects. Apart from NDIS, do other programs have that same kind of social connection aspect? For example, for aged care or for other things you're doing, is there that component built into funding?

HELEN MILLER: There is, yes. For example, in aged care, if you look at the Commonwealth Home Support Programme, which is the entry level into provision of aged care services for older people in their communities, that certainly includes the component of social support, individual social support, groups, community-based activities—so that is built in, as is the transport. Unfortunately, though, for many of those services—and this is from a provider perspective—the allocation of funds that we get to provide that service in aged care does not cover the cost of delivery of that service. It often relates to the distance that we have to travel. It's not unusual for our staff to travel an hour, an hour and a half, sometimes two hours to go and see a customer and potentially pick them up. I can assure you the hourly rate that we receive for the Commonwealth Home Support Programme, for example, does not cover that cost. Obviously, for an organisation, that becomes difficult.

The CHAIR: So the funding is for the activity, but then on top of that you need the travel, to pay your staff to get to the—

HELEN MILLER: Exactly. We pay our staff for the hours that they work, but we also pay them for the travel that they do, often in their own car.

The CHAIR: Are there regional premiums? If you're accessing that aged-care support, is that indexed depending on how far you live from services?

HELEN MILLER: Yes, it is. Under the Commonwealth Home Support Programme, it is. I know that they are reviewing the Modified Monash Model which, can I say, in my opinion desperately needs to be reviewed because it has crazy things. Like Broken Hill, for example, is a level three under aged care. The other complicating factor here is that the NDIS Modified Monash Model is completely different to the aged-care model. It's not the same. For example, if we have an NDIS customer in Broken Hill, we receive an additional allowance for the remote location to enable us to provide that service, which can be quite significant and helpful for the challenges that you have in getting workforce and paying people to go and provide those services. However, in aged care, under the Commonwealth Home Support Programme, they provide you with funding based on aged-care planning regions.

The State is divided up into aged-care planning regions. What it states in the rules is that you're only eligible for a Modified Monash allowance for remote if over 50 per cent of the services that you deliver in that aged-care planning region are in those kinds of locations. The Modified Monash Model works on a town-by-town basis. For example, let's take Orana Far West, which is a classic example. Broken Hill under aged care is a level three, so we don't get any allowance for that, but Menindee, which is 120 kilometres down the road, is a level seven. Menindee has a population of 120 people. There's no way that 50 per cent of our allocation for all of Orana Far West, which includes Dubbo, is going to be in our MM 5. I think it's MM 6 and 7 at the moment that we only receive that allowance for.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. I can hear what an expert you are, and I know that's Federal funding you've got.

HELEN MILLER: I know. It is Federal.

The CHAIR: But it's quite important for us because it impacts on how people engage in the community.

HELEN MILLER: It does.

The CHAIR: The funding might not be ours, but the impact on how people are feeling and those results are something that is relevant, so thank you for explaining that. I'm sorry I took us into a zone that's not strictly our jurisdiction, but it is an important context for us to know. I will hand over to Mr Barrett for further questions.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Thank you so much. We're certainly hearing in regional areas that transport's an issue: "We don't have public transport. We've got our road network to deal with." Mrs Miller, can you give us some examples of the norm and also some of the extremes that you're doing as far as transport that, if you weren't doing, might actually lead to exacerbating loneliness?

HELEN MILLER: Obviously, it depends on the assessed need of the individual, but what we aim to do is assess their needs and, if we can wherever possible and they want to attend a group, we do have the opportunity of our own because we happen to be blessed to have a community transport service. We may access them to go and pick those individuals up, but obviously we would have a limitation. For example, let's take Orange as an example. There's a radius within which we're able to do that because otherwise you would have older people sitting on a bus for longer than an hour and that's just not doable. We immediately then have a limited frame around how far we can do that—15 to 20 minutes. If you were to have a radius around each town, that would be the limit that we would be able to provide that bus service to go and collect a number of people, bring them into the centre and provide services and activities for them for that day.

But for those that are outside of that, what we rely on is that they will require our care worker, who is going out to provide a service, to bring them into town and undertake shopping activities, maybe go to the hairdresser, or whatever their needs are for them to do that, if they don't have the ability to come into town themselves. It's quite limiting, I think. As a provider, that service, the one to one, is obviously much more costly than the capacity to put them all in a bus where they get a lot of enjoyment as a group. We run some fabulous groups in some of our towns, but they're within a town and we have the capacity to go and pick people up. It's the ones that live outside of that perimeter that I believe don't engage as much in those kind of opportunities in a group setting as those that have the ability to live in town.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Which leads me quite nicely into my next question. Yes, we have some issues in a community like Orange compared to Sydney, but then there are far smaller, more remote and more isolated communities. What are some of the issues we're seeing unique to those smaller farming and rural communities?

HELEN MILLER: Well, they don't really have an opportunity to engage in any sort of activity. They're very limited and, at the very most, we might take them shopping and there's obviously that kind of engagement. But places like—I'm thinking of Condobolin, or other areas—there's not really a lot of opportunity in relation to activities and our capacity to bring them in and engage is challenging. It's not easy, and it's not then able to be provided on a frequent basis. It might be once a month, or it may be, at the very best, once a fortnight, depending on our availability in relation to staffing and the needs of others. As you know, workforce shortages are challenging everywhere, but they're especially challenging in rural, remote and regional locations. The capacity for a staff member, if they have four customers, we need to ensure that we plan their day so that they're driving the most first and that we bring them back in. That may mean that we're unable to provide a social outing for an individual in those circumstances because we just don't have the capacity to pick them up and then care for the other customers that we may have in that town.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: You probably don't spend as much time yourself travelling around, as you did once upon a time, but on those days when you were out there, you're driving back from a long day, you see that evening star come up and you make the wish on it, what's the wish on the star to fix this situation that we're facing?

HELEN MILLER: I've thought a lot about that, and I believe that we, all of providers, all of us—as in State, Commonwealth, councils—this is around us connecting in each of those communities. It's not a cookie-cutter approach, either. I think it's very much dependent upon the community and what their needs are, and it does vary. But it's around us working much better together across the boundaries to enable us to better service a community, in particular to service what they need for that community. It could be that they have a community hall or something. How can we all work together to enable that community hall in Condobolin, for example, to open that up for users across the board, and not just for people older but maybe people with a disability or those that need that social connection?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: The earlier we are touching this problem, the easier it is to fix with the early intervention we've heard about in a few different areas. Have you seen some good examples of that early intervention that are stopping people from becoming lonely so it's not a problem we have to fix, but a solution we have to foster?

HELEN MILLER: Yes, we do see that, and I think we see it because we have our customers who connect in with our coordinators and their workers. The earlier that you identify—for example, if someone's just coming on the journey of requiring aged-care services and they may only need domestic support, it's the establishment of that relationship between that organisation, that worker and that individual that can identify any needs that they might have and identify whether they are at risk of being lonely. As an organisation, we have what we call a risk register, and in that risk register one of our lists is people living alone, so that we, as an organisation, can better monitor those and check in with the workers to ensure that the needs of that particular customer are being met, or what is it we can do? What opportunities are there that we can better engage?

Sometimes it is about engaging wherever possible with families. Sometimes you are lucky, and a family member may live locally. They may be able to support that individual for coming into a group, if you are unable to go out. It is around that planning and understanding but, for me, it's around you need to do that initial assessment and you need to understand the needs of that customer, and you need to identify where they are at risk and then put something in place, or plan with them to enable them to better connect with their communities. It's about understanding what the customer needs and then investigating how best to engage with them. What opportunities are there? I know, for example—it just came to mind—near Condobolin I know there's a fabulous men's shed. If we identified that we had a customer in Condobolin that was looking for that, we would find ways of connecting in with the men's shed. It could very well be that they may volunteer to go and pick that customer up and take them in.

We rely very much on volunteers. I think that's an important part of every organisation. That's where they're critical in this particular instance. But I have to say that, before COVID, we had over 200 volunteers. Today we have 150, and we struggle to get volunteers. That's a diminishing pool of people, but they are very much a solution to better supporting customers in our communities who are feeling lonely and need to be connected. In our community transport, we've got amazing staff and volunteers who drive buses to pick people up. That is a win story. That is that engagement of that volunteer. They pick up the same group of people. Everybody knows everyone. There's connection already, immediately, in that bus taking them to wherever they need to go. Sometimes it can be shopping. Unfortunately, we don't have the resources to do that in every town. It's only in those areas where we are able to provide that kind of service. To me, that's the win—what works. That kind of win is fabulous.

We run a seniors centre in Broken Hill for older people, and the same group of women have been attending that for well over 10 years. That is a close-knit group, but what I can tell you is that I'm sure it enhances their life expectancy. It reduces their risk of health issues because they are connected. They're the kind of things that just are really positive. They really work well for those people who are at risk of being lonely. Unfortunately, given the tyranny of distance, it's not good support for us to do that to every single person. So there are people that miss out.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Given what you were just saying there—the more opportunities—if we invest in creating those more opportunities, the dividends might come out in other areas. You just talked about life expectancy and their health. So investing in those opportunities for social connectedness—the seniors club, the bridge club—pays dividends in other areas.

HELEN MILLER: Absolutely. There's plenty of research that will show you the connection between loneliness, social isolation and people's health, cardiovascular disease, mobility issues and even the beginning of cognitive decline. That social interaction will contribute to all of those things. There's absolutely no doubt about it. From a disability perspective, if I can speak on that as well, we're part of Ability First Australia and they recently undertook a study of looking at participants who engage in groups. Year on year, where there's been a decline in participants attending those groups, it definitely correlates and links to social isolation, to health issues and to poorer outcomes.

The CHAIR: I just had a follow up, if that's okay. We've heard a little bit about aged care—people that you work with and NDIS. I note that you also work with families and youth. The experience of younger people in the country, or youth in the country—I don't think we've really looked at that a lot. Is there anything in particular that you think would be useful for us to know with the work that you do in the youth area?

HELEN MILLER: My experience is very much through Carer Gateway. You'd be surprised how many youth, young people, are carers. Services such like Carer Gateway will provide them with an opportunity to network with their own. I think for younger people, when they are caring for someone, they don't have the ability to connect and link in with others their own age because they're busy caring. Services such as Carer Gateway will, obviously, link those younger people in and take them out on weekends away, et cetera. That's certainly that experience. They're the ones that I can really think of that are quite pronounced because these kids—and they're young. They can be under 10 and they're caring for their mother, or their parent, and they need support.

It's always, for me, what about the ones that you don't know—the ones that aren't linked in to Carer Gateway or the ones that aren't linked in to other services or to people who know where to connect them to? That's always, I think, a risk. I see that. If you become isolated, irrespective of your age, even if you're younger, you don't know what's going on, so you're not connected with other youth to enable you to look at what it is that I would like to do. But Carer Gateway do amazing things in relation to providing camps and opportunities with young carers to engage with others of their own age. I'm sure there's an element of it that's hidden: all those young people who are caring for someone that none of us know about, who don't have that access, who are isolated in local communities, and maybe struggle to attend school, let alone to engage in the broader community with their own. So, yes, we do see it.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I appreciate that. We have heard quite a bit about carers in general being vulnerable to loneliness and isolation, but I guess that's even more acute when you have younger people.

HELEN MILLER: When you're young.

The CHAIR: Yes. Sadly that's brough us to the end of our time for today, but I wanted to say thank you so much for being willing to come in and give evidence. It's very valuable for us, and we do appreciate it and the work that you do.

HELEN MILLER: Thank you for the opportunity.

(The witness withdrew.)

Ms JOSIE HOWARD, Director of Regional Workforce, Policy Reform and Evidence, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, New South Wales Government, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome and thank you very much for making the time to give evidence. Would you like to start by making a short statement or are you happy just to go into questions?

JOSIE HOWARD: I'm happy just to go to questions.

The CHAIR: We might start with our question that we whispered earlier: Could you explain a little bit about your position and what you do?

JOSIE HOWARD: Sure. My position looks after a section of critical and essential workforces across regional New South Wales that have been identified. One of the programs that could likely be the most relevant to you today would be the Essential Worker Attraction Program, which is supporting essential workers to relocate to regional New South Wales. The purpose behind it is to help to minimise staff churn that happens across those essential service industries. That's all of Heath, all of Education, Department of Communities and Justice, police, Corrections. Now we've also advanced to the Rural Fire Service and Fire and Rescue, as well as—did I say veterinary workforce? Veterinary workforce is our other essential industry.

The CHAIR: That's quite a big program. Obviously, you know that our interest is in loneliness and social isolation. I understand that, and I presume it's part of that essential worker program you have, there is something called The Welcome Experience program.

JOSIE HOWARD: Yes.

The CHAIR: I'm expecting that that is probably something that has relevance to what we're talking about. How are you trying to insulate people from being isolated when moving into a new and different community? Could you talk about that?

JOSIE HOWARD: The Essential Worker Attraction Program essentially has two streams. One is a marketing program, called Make the Move, which is looking at targeting metro Sydney essential workers, in those industries that I mentioned, to think about taking up jobs in regional New South Wales. The second part of that is the conversion piece, which is The Welcome Experience. The Welcome Experience is about creating connection between an essential worker who has newly moved to a location and the community where they live. It's not just about that essential worker themselves, but also their family. In the development of this program, which has now been active since 2022, the research showed that whilst people might move for an incentive—they might take up that initial incentive to take a job—unless they have that community connection, and unless they find their people and build more than just a job—they build themselves a home—they are likely to move back to where they find their people within two to three years.

So The Welcome Experience is in 55 LGAs across regional New South Wales. It employs essentially what we call a "Local Connector". That person is the person on the ground who knows everything there is to know about that town. They know where the best coffee is. They know where the schools are, what places are best to live and different places of worship. They look after the information outside the office space that you would get from your employer. They're a safe space to have a conversation about things that, potentially, people don't want to talk to their employers about. They can also use this local connector to help embed families and not just the worker themselves.

The CHAIR: Thank you, that's really helpful. It seems like quite a large project given that you're in 55 LGAs and the breadth of the workforce that you cover. Can you explain to me a bit about the second part? The Welcome Experience is about making connections in community. You have this Local Connector, but what does connection mean aside from saying, "This is where this is, and this is where that is." How do you measure, or how are you looking to show, that you've created those connections?

JOSIE HOWARD: Absolutely. Workers who are moving through the program move through stages which are for 12 months, basically. There's a pre-move stage where they're asking questions like—I'm sure that you've come across these in your hearings, with people saying, "Can I go to a Woolworths? Is there a coffee place there? What is my life going to look like moving to this regional location?" They're in an education phase. They actually can assist them with the moving by connecting them with real estate agents, assisting with the types of people who actually move people into those different towns and that sort of thing. Once they land, they get a welcome.

There is a personal welcome that comes from the Local Connector where they meet with them and get to know them and their family. They might say, "My child is really into soccer", or "We have X, Y or Z religion, is there a place of worship here", and all those sorts of initial conversations. Then they actually work with them for

12 months—as long as the person wants to be engaged—to link them into different interest groups or sporting groups or that sort of thing. They keep linking in with those essential workers throughout that 12-month period. It's not just, "Here's a list of all the soccer clubs, and you should go and check them out." It's actually, "I'll meet you down at a club day. This is the president"—actually holding their hands in a bit more of a focused approach than what's been done in the past or what's been able to be done in the past due to funding.

The other interesting piece about this is that we have got a continuous improvement program that sits within The Welcome Experience and the overall Essential Worker Attraction Program. We have surveys. We have gone out and actually done insights with our essential workers to see what works for them, where we can do better with our Local Connectors and what type of information our essential workers are asking for. Interestingly, the second highest thing that people were asking for is social connection. The second highest thing that our essential workers are asking for is, "How can I connect my family and myself into things bigger than just the workplace that we're moving to?"

The program also does assist with partner employment. One of the other things we learnt in our research was that, whilst our essential workers know that their skills are needed everywhere and there is a skill shortage across New South Wales for the types of things they can deliver, they were worried about what was in it for their partner and what was in it for the kids. There's also an element of the program that supports partner employment. Interestingly, Local Connectors have been able to facilitate that quite easily due to wide skill shortages across regional New South Wales. That is also another piece that has been quite interesting in terms of uptake of the program.

The CHAIR: Your Local Connectors—what do they tell you about the experience? We know that if you're not connected you're likely to leave, but what do they tell you about their feedback on feeling isolated? You must get some intel on the experience?

JOSIE HOWARD: Yes. There's probably two things that are relevant there. One is that some of our surveys and insights have shown that essential workers have said, "If there was no local connector, I wouldn't have moved. If there was no-one there for me to reach out to and have those initial discussions with, the jump is too scary and I wouldn't have made it." Secondly, sometimes it is about knowing where some of those niche interests are, or things that are challenging or frightening for particular CALD groups or people who have never lived in regional areas, and having that Local Connector there to be able to buffer those sorts of challenges and also, in some instances, create space. That could be things like encouraging a multicultural festival or encouraging through their welcome events. They'll have welcome events within each of those locations every year where they invite all new residents to come and be welcomed to the community, to find out what's going on and to meet their local heroes, mayors and politicians. Those pieces of connection have been really important for people to be able to find their space within community.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: The Welcome events you were just talking about then, are they run by the Local Connectors with the essential workers who've gone to that area?

JOSIE HOWARD: Yes. We've got 15 host agencies that looked after 55 LGAs across the regions. Those host agencies then host those welcome events that they deliver in whatever way is best for their community.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Do you have Local Connectors in each of those 55 LGAs?

JOSIE HOWARD: We have them represented in each of those 55 LGAs, but we have 33 Local Connectors.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: The experiences people are looking for when they move to regional areas, are they looking to replicate the connections and experience they had in metro areas or are they looking for or expecting different experiences in regional communities?

JOSIE HOWARD: Interestingly, when we did the research for the Make the Move campaign—that conversion piece to The Welcome Experience, as I mentioned—people were saying, "My job is pretty much going to be the same wherever I go." What they were really interested in is the lifestyle—"What are the benefits of the lifestyle? What's in it for me? What's in it for my kids?" Some of the pain points that came out through that research were things like traffic, not being able to attend kids training and more stress in terms of logistics. There are challenges around the perceived level of services that are available—things like, "Is there a Woolies? Can I get a coffee?" In terms of the way they want to live their lifestyle, the research that we did shows that they want a more relaxed family-focused or social-focused lifestyle.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I've lived in some regional communities, and it sort of breaks down to people wanting to be back where they came from and still maintain those connections, and people that go, "I live

here, and I'm going to make the most of it." I'm guessing the people who are going through these programs are more likely to be the latter.

JOSIE HOWARD: Yes. What I will say is that this is a volunteer program. People are signed up themselves. They go through the website and sign themselves up. They've seen the marketing or they've seen it on the recruitment packs that they get from their employer or that sort of thing. If they don't want to participate in the program, they don't need to. In saying that, our inquiries are well over 2,000 and we've had over around 950 people that have moved through the program since it has been established.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can I keep playing with some numbers? You talk about people that sign up for a 12-month period or as long as they want. How many are currently actively engaged in this?

JOSIE HOWARD: I can get you the numbers.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Will you take that on notice?

JOSIE HOWARD: I can take that on notice and I can get those numbers, but in terms of people that have moved—I thought you might be interested in some numbers—950 workers have relocated from the beginning of this week and 526 of those have been health workers. Then we move into education being the next highest, and then police, DCJ, our firies and Corrective Services.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can you also provide us a breakdown of the areas they're working in?

JOSIE HOWARD: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: You said 55 LGAs. What are they, what host agencies do they fill into and how do they work that way?

JOSIE HOWARD: Yes, absolutely.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: You said the social connection was number two. Can you tell us what number one is?

JOSIE HOWARD: I believe it was housing. I'll take that on notice and confirm, but I believe it was housing.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: How small a community are you reaching out into?

JOSIE HOWARD: It's got a really good breadth. We've got some major regional cities like Coffs Harbour. That's the thing. We've got smaller towns like Wentworth and Balranald. Broken Hill is a really high performer in The Welcome Experience. They have a lot of contracts that go through Broken Hill. They're very active in terms of working in their people and trying to connect them into community while they're there, with the hope that they stay or come back. They have been very successful in the program. There are places like Bourke. I can give you the full list. We tried to cover as much geography as we could, as well as as much demography as we could.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: What's your stick rate out of those 950?

The CHAIR: That's exactly what I was going to ask.

JOSIE HOWARD: We've got an external evaluation in the works that will give us the element of stickiness to how many people are staying.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Sorry, is that a term you've actually used before?

JOSIE HOWARD: I have used the "stickiness" term, yes. The other is the why—why people are leaving and where they're going to. As I mentioned, with the shortage of skills, some of the agencies have moved to short-term contracts to keep the service moving. You may have someone who moves to a place like Broken Hill and their contract is just up. They have to go because their contract is up, not because they haven't enjoyed their experience. Another outcome of this program is the hope that, even if they do go back to their metro location, they talk about how great it was to live in regional New South Wales. That builds the brand that overcomes some of those challenges that I mentioned earlier about serviceability and connection of community and that sort of thing. I'm hoping that by the end of this year we will have some more information on that churn rate, but at the moment it's just too soon.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Some of the surveys and stuff you're doing, what are they telling you about what people are liking? Is it events? Is it that they talk to their neighbours? How much detail have you got on that?

JOSIE HOWARD: We've got varying levels of detail. Some of it is some qualitative surveys where we've spoken to people and got numbers as well as commentary. What they're talking about liking is knowing who the people in the community are so you're not just a number when you're walking down the street. They're also talking about the focus on family. A lot of the work that we're doing is around that mid-level workforce because it's our biggest quota. They typically have primary to younger kids, and it's the time with family and the time for their kids to do things that potentially they weren't able to do in metro.

The CHAIR: I have a supplementary question on that. Is there anything that you're hearing from your Local Connectors that—we've been hearing from organisations about what they do but also what they need. I wonder if Local Connectors are feeding back things that they would like to be able to be doing or providing or that they're being asked for that aren't available because it is the area that they're in or a particular region. Is there anything missing that they're asking for?

JOSIE HOWARD: Not that springs to mind. I can take that on notice and go through some of our research and see what has come back. But, typically, our Local Connectors are positively geared. They're the biggest smile in the community where they work. That's been the reason why they're so good at being in that role. A lot of the things that they are asking for are support and continuation and that sort of thing, as opposed to additional services within community. Some of our more isolated areas did ask for extra funding for things like events because they don't exist. There's no community group to drive it. They need to be the ones to pick it up and run with the ideas. There's certainly that element, the more isolated or smaller the community. But in terms of a primary theme, I'll have a look.

The CHAIR: That events example is interesting because of what we heard before.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: I wonder whether or not some elements of the program could form the genesis of targeted interventions by government in rural communities more broadly beyond essential workers. In assessing the success of the program, is the Government looking at that through the lens of maybe applying some elements of the program beyond essential workers in rural communities, or there's just no answer to that at the moment?

JOSIE HOWARD: I don't have an answer to it at the moment. This program is a funded program focused on those industries through till 30 June 2026. We'll go through an evaluation process. As I said, we're doing some now. We'll do it again. And we'll provide options to government for them to consider.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: Would there be merit in looking at elements of the program to tackling loneliness more broadly?

JOSIE HOWARD: I think one of the outcomes of the program that we've seen early on is that it's got great benefit for agencies in terms of they deliver the platform of community—those agencies that we target. They are the services that every community needs in order to be healthy and function well and create a positively geared society. Then it also has benefits for the community itself as it takes these people in and they grow and they get benefit from a rising population, regardless of whether the person is a firey or a police officer or where they sit. So I certainly think there are global outcomes that we will see from the evaluation, but what happens with those is beyond me.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: Given the breadth of the local government areas that the program covers, it just strikes me to be a shame to not leverage the success from elements of the program beyond essential workers if there's the scope to do it.

JOSIE HOWARD: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So there are about 20 people per Local Connector that have been housed—950 divided by 55?

JOSIE HOWARD: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Following on from that, how much at capacity are these people?

JOSIE HOWARD: They're pretty busy. We have regular meetings with our Local Connectors and host agencies to make sure that they are able to take on the capacity that they have—that they're not being overworked and that sort of thing. Some of the moves are a long burn; some of them are quick. They've all got different sorts of processes and efficiencies in place that help them to be able to deliver on what they need to for the contract. Our contract with our Local Connectors is basically around the data, the connection, the events—those really core things that we know are important across all of the 55 locations. But the way that they deliver the service in their community is individual to each location, which is what we learnt in the pilot was super important. Coming in over the top and just saying, "This is the framework we need you to work in." An example would be, "You need

to have your welcome event in April." That doesn't work for everywhere because they've got people who leave during that time or school's not back—

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: It's really cold.

JOSIE HOWARD: It's really cold. We tried to get one happening late last year and they said, "All of our teachers have gone on holidays. They're all out." So they deliver the program in their location, specific to their locations. We went out with an open tender and said, "How do you want to deliver it?" Then they came back to us and said, "We think we can do it this way."

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: It may be a double-barrelled question that I could split up, but where are they physically housed. They've got to be very well-connected. How do they stay so connected?

JOSIE HOWARD: They're employed with different host agencies in each of those locations. For example, you might have an RDA that is our contractor to deliver The Welcome Experience. They may have a Local Connector. Using Orana as an example, RDA Orana has their home base in Dubbo. They've got a central Local Connector in Walgett. They've got another one in Mudgee, and they've got another one in Bourke[1].

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Just to save us spending some time on it now, can I ask for that to be provided on notice as well?

JOSIE HOWARD: Yes, sure.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: That's fantastic. Second question: How do they stay so well-connected? They're obviously local people.

JOSIE HOWARD: To community?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes.

JOSIE HOWARD: It's actually the most important part of the program.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Because if they send someone to the wrong rugby club, I'd be furious.

JOSIE HOWARD: That's right, it would be terrible, and regional people understand that. When I present about the program, I often talk about the Local Connectors as being the linchpin. They are the most important part of the program. They are the face of that community from the time that someone thinks about moving to the time they actually land on the doorstep. Whilst it's probably a hard thing to be able to employ for, they are local to the community and they are well connected. Then the role itself actually keeps them connected because it's about pushing them out into community and bringing people into the experience themselves. Absolutely, that's one of the most important things.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for joining us today. It's really fascinating. I knew about the program in theory, but I didn't have any idea what it looked like. We'd love to get that information back on notice. The secretariat will liaise with you about that. We appreciate it very much.

(The witness withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

[1] In correspondence to the committee dated 4 March 2025, Ms Josie Howard, Director Regional Workforce Policy Reform and Evidence, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, clarified the evidence given advising that 'there is no Local Connector in Mudgee'.

Ms MONICA BARONE, Chief Executive Officer, City of Sydney, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Ms SHANNON CARRUTH, Manager, Inclusive and Creative Communities, Tweed Shire Council, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Ms MELISSA LINDEBERG, Community Development Officer Social Planning, Tweed Shire Council, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome and thank you very much for taking the time to give evidence and for the submissions from both of your councils. Would you like to both start by making short opening statements? Ms Barone?

MONICA BARONE: We submitted a very comprehensive submission. I'm not really going to go over any of that material, because you've got it. The only thing I wanted to say a few words on was that I reviewed that submission and was thinking about preparing for today. Of course, there are so many things that could go into supporting people who are experiencing loneliness, and many of them are not in the hands of local government, such as mental health services, housing and appropriate financial support. But, of course, as our submission quite comprehensively points out, this is one area where local government can play a really significant role because we are the custodians of a great deal of community infrastructure, both physical infrastructure and social infrastructure in the form of staff at libraries, community centres and recreation centres that are able to create those opportunities for people to come together. So I think it's such an important role that local government already plays, and it already makes a fabulous contribution. Of course, this is a great opportunity to amplify that and to demonstrate the role it can play in alleviating loneliness in our community. I genuinely welcome the opportunity to work closely with other levels of government to use those resources to get the very best for our communities.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Tweed, do you have an opening statement?

SHANNON CARRUTH: Yes. Thank you for the opportunity to provide evidence. We will also take our submission as read, but there are five key points we would like to just highlight. First of all there is the local context here in the Tweed. We've faced compounding challenges from COVID-19 and the border closures, the catastrophic floods in 2022 and the ongoing housing crisis. Tweed is one of the top three LGAs in New South Wales most affected by homelessness after City of Sydney and Byron, and it also has some of the highest suicide rates in regional New South Wales. We recommend particularly funding from the State Government and looking at realigning grant funding to support long-term prevention models focused on building strong networks within communities, service providers and the government. Our local services are reporting that short-term funding cycles are creating uncertainty in the community. They disrupt their program continuity and reduce collaboration because of the competition for funds.

Secondly, it's the cross-sector collaboration. We advocate for more collaboration between State Government, local councils and the service sector. We believe that's really vital. Projects like Northern Rivers Zero and Tweed Zero, aiming to end rough sleeping and having a collective impact approach, are working in the homelessness space, and we think similar frameworks could be used to address and tackle loneliness. Thirdly, really look at State Government action, particularly around transport in regional areas, in particular the opportunity Transport has for strengthening social connections, particularly in regional areas. We encourage Transport for NSW to deliver on objective 5 of the Tweed Regional City Action Plan to develop a connected transport network.

Finally, taxation reform—there is an untapped opportunity to reduce homelessness and address housing shortages. Council, in particular our general manager, Troy Green, has been advocating since 2015 for taxation reforms that aim to incentivise the use of underutilised rooms in existing housing, and that low-risk tax reform would have minimum impact on government revenue. The full details are in our submission. We recognise that reducing loneliness requires sustained funding, strong partnerships, better transport and supportive housing policies, and it's only by working together at multiple levels of government and the service sector that we're going to be able to tackle loneliness. Thank you for the opportunity.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that; we appreciate it. I wonder if I could begin with a question regarding the City of Sydney submission. Your submission talks about a connected city where people feel welcome and have a sense of belonging. I am wondering if you could talk a bit about what that means in practice. What are the features of a connected city, and what is the role that local government plays in that?

MONICA BARONE: When we talk about a connected city, I guess what we're talking about is how you get the nexus between urban planning and service planning. One of the things that we talk about in our submission is the role of urban planning in making a more friendly and inclusive city. Obviously, when you have

lots of free and public open space and facilities, you are enabling people to come together just through the nature of the design of the city.

When I was reflecting on this I thought about how probably one of the most significant things we've done to date to reduce loneliness—because a lot of people in the City of Sydney are living in dwellings on their own—is the emphasis we have on off-leash dog parks. Many people will talk to me about the fact that they meet their neighbours through their dogs and that pets break down the barriers, because people know each other's dogs' names as much as they know each other's names. It's just a very easy way for people to come together. But, if we didn't put so much work into creating those off-leash parks—first you have to have the park, then you have to make it off-leash, but you have to have rangers, you have to have bags for picking up rubbish, and you have to have all sorts of infrastructure that people don't really see or understand. It's quite costly to create an urban space that is very inclusive and encourages coming together. Playgrounds bring families together. When people live in apartments, playgrounds and parks that have lots of barbecues, benches and other infrastructure that enable people to have their children's birthday parties out in the public domain—you can design opportunities for people to come together.

Then, of course, there is pedestrianisation. Of course, we're an inner city and we're very dense, so there are things that we can do that our colleagues in other local governments can't do. We can certainly create a physically connected city where people can easily walk—or easily cycle—because there are good footpaths, there is lots of lighting, and safety is designed into those pathways so that, again, people can feel comfortable to leave their homes and go to the infrastructure that provides support. Then, of course, there are things like free wi-fi. I often say you could probably go to a free event every night of the week in the City of Sydney. If you look at the What's On, between the talks, galleries, museums and the literally hundreds of community events that we hold—I was just reading them all in preparation—whether it's the seniors' sit down yoga class, the mums' and bubs' story time, the Mandarin story time or the Auslan story time, there are many, many little events that bring people out. But the underlying design—there's thought that's gone into where these things are placed and how they are physically connected, and the amenity that they have to then contribute to that social connection.

The CHAIR: Tweed Shire Council, in your opening statement you mentioned the particular impacts of natural disasters. We've heard from other witnesses and read in submissions about the impact of those disasters, and the knock-on in terms of isolation and loneliness. Can you reflect on the impacts of the experiences of the past few years?

SHANNON CARRUTH: We had two very significant floods at the start—February and March 2022. We had 500 homes declared uninhabitable in those flood events. That permanently displaces those people from their immediate community and support structures. We have temporary housing villages—pod villages—located in the Tweed, but that is also housing people from out of area. One of the impacts on them, obviously, is not having their support structures around them in those temporary pod villages, and very little certainty about what next. Those temporary housing villages are coming to the end of their leases, and there's currently no advice as to what's next for those tenants. That uncertainty, and living with that uncertainty since 2022, takes a toll on those people.

On top of that, in terms of culturally appropriate temporary relocation of people who have been flood affected, we are housing Aboriginal people in the Tweed from off country, which has caused impacts to the local Bundjalung community here. So more culturally appropriate temporary housing is something to be considered moving forward. I think the uncertainty and the displacement are certainly two main aspects. The ongoing uncertainty is really difficult, but then I would also say, in terms of its impact on loneliness, where we're looking at investing much more time is, in peacetime, in building those social connections and the community resilience teams, in peacetime, so that if and when the next disaster happens those connections and networks are much stronger to be able to help each other through that natural disaster and then out the other side as well. But funding at the moment often comes at the time of the disaster, and in between disasters isn't necessarily available for programs that support that connectivity. It's having the foresight to invest in those community-building-type activities in peacetimes and not only invest in them at times of disaster. Do you have anything to add, Melissa?

MELISSA LINDEBERG: That covers those, thanks.

The CHAIR: If I can ask a follow-up question, what are the types—we got quite a lot in the answer from Sydney as well. We've heard a lot about building connections and the types of activities to build connections. In your particular area, in those particular circumstances, what are those activities? We talk about generic opportunities for social connection, but for your particular area, which is a bit different to Sydney or other places, what are the activities that you think would be most useful in building those connections?

SHANNON CARRUTH: Particularly with the context of natural disaster response, or more generally?

The CHAIR: Both—more generally, I think, because you were also talking about building longer term resilience, so I think they're connected.

SHANNON CARRUTH: Absolutely. We have a range of programs, some targeted at specific cohorts—for example, seniors. We have programs to support seniors with digital literacy where we will match them with younger people to support their digital literacy and learning, and that builds those connections. We have programs, for example, like Auslan tours of our gallery, museum, dementia programs, those sorts of things, to try to encourage them together. But then we also have—I mentioned our community resilience teams that we do with the Red Cross. We have community barbeques and things with those community resilience teams that take a leading role within a local community during a disaster—that in peacetimes we keep those communities connected through regular barbeques or regular catch-ups where those networks are maintained.

One of the key aspects City of Sydney referred to earlier was about activating public spaces and community halls and buildings as well. I would say one of our key challenges—or key opportunities, I guess, that we're looking to maximise on—is activating our community halls. We work with community hall committees that are made up of local residents who help to activate that. We facilitate a community of practice with those community hall committees to help them share best practice and share resources on how to activate their halls. But one of the challenges local government experiences is the ability to maintain those buildings and the financial sustainability of doing that. We try to provide those facilities to the community at very low cost to support community connectivity outcomes, but that means that there's huge impost on local government budgets to keep those community facilities at an appropriate condition to be able to be used by the community, and that's an ongoing challenge for local government.

MONICA BARONE: It is something that we also say in our submission. On the positive, we all know that local government can play an incredibly important role, but in order for us to play that role, obviously we need the resources: we need to be able to afford to maintain that infrastructure and to have the staff that bring people together and organise those events. One of the reasons that this inquiry is so important is that you're looking at the issue, but you're also talking—and I think it says this in our submission, and I think it's in there in your terms of reference, if I'm correct. At some point we have to quantify the problem, get the data, and also understand the best thing to do—and I know that's what you're looking at; that's why you're doing this inquiry.

If we come to the conclusion—in a way, a lot of us are working anecdotally, right? Not entirely—we know that when people are coming together, they're definitely happier and more likely to go home happier and all the rest of it. We also know from natural disasters and resilience work that communities that are very connected and have that social capital do bounce back from a crisis more quickly. There are definitely quantifiable improvements that come from doing this. But we do need a better evidence base because with that evidence base, I guess, then councils can make a case to government and say, "It might just look like a hall, but let me explain to you what it actually represents." I know you know that, Chair, and I know people know that intuitively and intrinsically, but we need to try to quantify it. "This is what it represents; this is the difference that it can make." You have to acknowledge that.

At the moment, we have to face—there is no local government, and City of Sydney is exactly the same. I keep saying, "City of Sydney is in the same position as every other local government. We're just getting there slower." There is hardly any local government that is generating enough revenue to deal with managing its assets. It's only that City of Sydney is getting there a bit slower, but everybody is spending more than they are making and the gap is closing and closing and closing. We need to be able to make the human, social and economic case for this. If people think that local government is about roads, rates and rubbish—well, we're not going to get there. There is a layer of infrastructure and a layer of service that is completely foundational to dealing with this issue, and knowledge and capability, and it is completely in the hands of local government. It is probably one of the most significant things we can contribute to society.

The CHAIR: Thank you both for that answer. I will pass over to my colleagues for some questions. Mr Barrett?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Thank you very much. Can I first go to Tweed, please? In your submission you say that trauma can create a cycle of loneliness that becomes difficult to break. I wonder if you can touch more on that specifically in reference to natural disasters. I feel like we can picture that. There's a big surge of outpouring and connectivity but, over time, does fatigue break that down? They're my thoughts, but you are the experts, and I'd love to know your thoughts on it, please.

MELISSA LINDEBERG: In terms of the collective trauma events, there has been some work with the Department of Communities and Justice as well looking at this space and the psychosocial impacts of those accumulative events. For example, during COVID, people were disengaging from mainstream media, community groups, family and friends, so I guess part of it relates to how people react in those events, and those connections

or the strength of those networks contribute to that. The research is showing the critical role that that community connectedness and support can play in dealing with those collective traumatic events. I guess that also comes back to the discussion of these collaborations, these ways that we can get community together—sometimes community led. Yes, council has this strong role and key role to play, but council's role can also be to connect with services, connect with community and with other groups to help navigate those traumas at that time.

SHANNON CARRUTH: The other thing I'd just add is the impact of those compounding events—the COVID pandemic, the floods, the housing crisis—and the impact that has on service sector workers as well, and their fatigue and burnout. What we've experienced in the Tweed is a higher turnover of staff within our service sector, which has impacts on the relationships they have with clients, to support clients as well. They're always starting from scratch. Just making reference to my opening statement as well, where I spoke to the short-term funding for short-term projects, that meant that projects don't necessarily build up those long-term relationships. When you have high turnover and those relationships aren't built up over time, and that collective trauma in the community, there is that fatigue—they drop out of programs, they stop trying. We have certainly observed that.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: To be honest, you've probably answered my follow-up questions to that earlier, so I'll move on to another one. We're getting towards the pointy end of this inquiry. We've had a fair bit of evidence in front of us. Something I'm starting to wonder is whether reducing loneliness is more of an outcome of other policies that we might have around infrastructure, supporting active kids, shared spaces, green spaces. If we get those policies right, with a consideration for loneliness, will the outcome be a reduction in the impacts and prevalence of loneliness?

The CHAIR: Feel free for anyone to comment.

MONICA BARONE: I think to some extent you're right. I mean, if all of those things that human beings and societies need are catered for, then the consequences of what happens to people when they don't have those things will be diminished, right? So if you're surrounded by people that you care about and that care about you, if you've got the services that you need, if you're not concerned about the security of your shelter or where your next meal will come from, all of those things are going to diminish the impact of loneliness. But having said that, I think that we're seeing worldwide, particularly probably in western countries—we have to call out loneliness, though. I don't think we can just say, "We'll fix everything else. We don't need to name it." I think that we do need to name it. This is why this inquiry's so interesting and we're all so happy to see it—that you've come forward with it. We do need to name it as an actual consequence so that we make sure that the actions actually deal with those symptoms, for want of a better word.

My colleagues from Tweed have been speaking about getting things done that lead to deep changes, sustained change and resilience in the community. It's not enough to say—and we all know this—we'll have the occasional barbeque. People need way more than that, but the barbeque is a part of the spectrum of activities that contributes. We're very good at doing a lot of those barbeques and community activities, but if then people still don't have a home or still don't know where their next meal is going to come from, yes, they're going to be better off than if they didn't have the barbeque, but it's not enough.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I think it was sort of triggered a little bit by your dog park example. I'm sure that in the conception of the dog park it wasn't conceived to tackle loneliness, but one of the outcomes has been that. If we put loneliness at that higher level when we're conceptualising what infrastructure activities we need, then we can sharpen our focus on that.

MONICA BARONE: Yes, but it was conceptualised to deal with loneliness and social cohesion. It absolutely was. I think this is the thing about local government planning. One of my very favourite events that we run every year—and we do a few of them every year—is pet day. Pet day is mostly for social cohesion because we have a very high level of people living in social housing in the City of Sydney. Their companion is their pet, and they can't afford vet services. So on pet day—we have a relationship and we fund the university veterinary clinic—the local vets come out and volunteer.

People come to pet day and they have their animal checked. They have their animal vaccinated. They have their animal chipped. We give them a new collar and those sorts of things. If the animal needs more than that, then they're referred on to the vet hospital, the university teaching hospital, so they can get the service for free. We gave a very big grant to the teaching hospital so that they can deliver the services. It really was the whole pet piece because we know it's so important to lonely people, to people's wellbeing. Just that layer around enabling people to have pets is part of our social plan and our social thinking. The park is part of the infrastructure that enables people to have their pet.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Just as a bit of a contrast for Tweed, we heard earlier that there's not a night in Sydney where there's not some sort of activity on, which is fantastic. Is that the same experience that

we're seeing in some of our smaller regional communities in your area of Pottsville? Does it have an event on every night? If not, would having those events be advantageous in reducing loneliness?

SHANNON CARRUTH: Thanks for the question. Yes, we do have a What's On as well and there is a lot on across the shire. I would say probably not within a community—just, say, Pottsville having something all the time—but definitely across the shire. The challenge is often transport. It's available to people who can have their own private transport to get to and from places. The challenge is cost of, one, getting to those places but also of the events themselves, the venues themselves. Again, it comes back to the important role that local government plays in making those community spaces available, accessible and free. But, yes, activity-wise, there is a lot happening in private locations. We're doing what we can in activating our local government spaces, but definitely that's an area where additional funding in activating public spaces and halls and revitalising spaces for events and bringing people together would be welcome.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Thank you. You've saved me having to fight for any more questions.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: This might be more relevant to the City of Sydney, but I'll ask you all. Given the increasing trend to higher density living, I am interested in what levers councils have with respect to incentivising better social connectedness in built form. I know that in the City of Sydney submission particularly there's a reference to amenity DCPs and requirements around communal open spaces—landscaping, transition zones and all those sorts of things. In poorer developments, developers will sort of see that as a tick-a-box exercise and not really have a genuine commitment to that, whereas in good developments there is a real, genuine place-making approach to those developments. I'm just wondering, beyond DCP requirements, which can be treated like a tick-a-box, are there other incentives that councils or governments can apply to force private developers, in particular, to take a real and genuine place-making approach to higher density living?

MONICA BARONE: You cut out at the beginning, and I think you were referring that question to me in the first instance.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: Yes.

MONICA BARONE: Obviously in the City of Sydney, property values are very high. We deal with a lot of developers who do truly understand that one of the ways that they maintain the value of their property, and therefore the opportunity that they get from that, is by ensuring that the places that they build do have that amenity. They work very closely with us to deliver it. They see the benefit because they get a return as a consequence of developing in areas with very high amenity. One of the biggest projects we've done here at the City of Sydney in the time that I've been here and the Lord Mayor, Clover Moore, has been here is the Green Square urban renewal site. That's home to 65,000 people and 25,000 jobs. It's a small city, right? The urban planning work that we did with the developers was very much around ensuring that the place had all of the amenity, all of the civil infrastructure and all of the community infrastructure.

Developers promoted their development with the pictures of that community infrastructure because people would ask the developer, "If I buy an apartment here, will there be a library? Will there be a school? Where will the swimming pool be?" It was in their interests to have those services delivered. They worked very closely with us to ensure that those services were delivered. I have to say that of the $1.8 billion worth of public infrastructure in Green Square, 75 per cent of that came from the developer contributions. When I get the transcript, I'll make sure I've got the numbers right. I know that the 75 per cent is right, but it is the scale of the infrastructure that I need to check. Part of the skill of it is demonstrating to the developer and the investor that this is worthwhile, because it means—high-quality places maintain their value.

SHANNON CARRUTH: I probably wouldn't characterise our situation in the Tweed in the same way. I think our experience has not necessarily been as positive in terms of the willingness. There is, at the beginning of a process, a lot of willingness around the place-making and good community outcomes. Often we see with larger developments some of those positive aspects that are around social connection or opportunities to come together get scrapped away a little bit by the end of the process. The Tweed has a lot of constrained land, whether it be bushfire, flood risk or not zoned for residential. We've got a lot of State significant farmland and the like. Space for housing is at a premium as well. Developers will often look at the yield of their area and sometimes the better place-making outcomes are sacrificed. I think particularly at the moment, when there is such a focus on the number of new homes being implemented across the State, that provides a challenge. I think we haven't necessarily got the same level of commitment in the Tweed.

The CHAIR: Unfortunately we've come to the end of our time. I did want to thank you for your submissions, which were very useful, and also for your evidence today. We know how busy local government is, so thank you for the time taken to speak with us today. We will get back to you if you took anything on notice—

I'm not sure—but we'll certainly have the secretariat liaise with you on that or if there are supplementary questions from us.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Mr PETER DOUGLAS, Member, Borenore Nashdale Community Men's Shed, Australian Men's Shed Association, before the Committee

Ms BETH GOW, Shed Support NSW/ACT, Australian Men's Shed Association, before the Committee

Ms MICHELLE HOLLAND, Assistant Treasurer, Orange Evening VIEW Club, before the Committee

Ms ANNE-MAREE DAVIS, Vice President/Secretary, Orange Evening VIEW Club, before the Committee

Ms HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID, Cooperative Member, THE Rural Woman, before the Committee

Ms GLENDA GAVIN, Vice President, Central Western Group, Country Women's Association of NSW, before the Committee

Mrs HELEN JAMES, Member, Orange Branch, Country Women's Association of NSW, before the Committee

The CHAIR: Welcome, and thank you all for coming along and making the time to attend this roundtable discussion today. I think I have introduced myself to everyone, but I am Sarah Kaine, the Chair of the Committee. The purpose of the round table is to have as informal and free-flowing a discussion as we like about the experience of loneliness in regional communities. Throughout the round table, I'm very happy if people want to respond to others or just signal that you want to jump in. Be aware, though, that Hansard can only capture one person speaking at a time. Please try to feel as relaxed to contribute as you can. To assist with that, we might quickly go around the room and have everyone introduce themselves and where they're from. There'll be a chance to speak more about what your organisation does and what you do.

MERRIN THOMPSON: I'm part of the committee secretariat team.

The CHAIR: She makes everything run.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'm on the Committee but am also an Orange local. Thanks so much for coming out. It's very important that we have our regional views expressed in this Committee.

PETER DOUGLAS: I'm from Borenore Nashdale men's shed.

BETH GOW: I work for the Australian Men's Shed Association.

MICHELLE HOLLAND: I'm from the Orange Evening VIEW Club, and also on the committee for Orange U3A.

ANNE-MAREE DAVIS: I'm from the Orange Evening VIEW Club.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: I'm here representing THE Rural Woman co-operative. I also have another hat—I'm an ICPA federal council member as well.

The CHAIR: Could you spell out the ICPA?

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: ICPA stands for Isolated Children's Parents' Association. There's State bodies as well, and we have one in New South Wales. We represent a push for equality of access to education for regional and rural kids.

GLENDA GAVIN: I'm with the Central Western Group of the CWA—Country Women's Association.

HELEN JAMES: I'm from the Country Women's Association and am a member of the Orange branch. I have been a member of CWA for about 40 years, but not all the time at Orange—mainly at Nashdale.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: I'm a member of the Committee from Sydney, but I would dearly love to move to the Central West—it's gorgeous out here.

The CHAIR: Some of the organisations here are better known than others. I think all of your organisations centrally put in a submission and we've had evidence from them. We are hoping to get a very local view and experience from you. I think I might start with VIEW because you may be a little less known than the other groups. If you could explain what you do in Orange and how that relates to loneliness or dealing with it.

ANNE-MAREE DAVIS: The VIEW club is affiliated with the Smith Family. We report to them financially and everything. The way VIEW is set up is we are a group of 65 women that meet once a month and we have a committee that meets once a month. We raise money for underprivileged students across New South Wales. We currently sponsor five students. There's a number of different VIEW clubs basically across Australia. I know in the Central West here we have Bathurst, Parkes, Forbes, Mudgee, Orange, Dubbo—I can't remember

any more. Mudgee is the biggest. They have over 250 members, where we've got 65, but we're working on that. What else would you like to know?

The CHAIR: It's wonderful work that your organisation does for disadvantaged children. What is the role of bringing the women together?

ANNE-MAREE DAVIS: Like I said, we meet once a month and we have a dinner. Our dynamic is women of late thirties to late eighties, and we just have conversations. We have guests. We play a lot of games. We have a lot of entertainment. Primarily, we're all friends with everyone, basically. We try to get out and about outside of our meetings and have morning teas and things like that.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can I jump in on that? This seems like another example—we're hearing a few of them—where there are the dual benefits in that the women coming to your organisation get to tackle their loneliness but also the work you're doing aids others and combats others' loneliness as well.

ANNE-MAREE DAVIS: Exactly, we try to do that. I joined VIEW because my mum was in it. My mum is now nearly 79. She said, "Why don't you come along?" I'd just had two children and I was quite, I would say, on my own. I've got husband but it's different. Anyway, she said, "Come along." I been a member ever since. They welcomed me with open arms. They made me feel part of a family. I think our club is a family.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I wonder if I could then turn to Ms Whigham-Reid. Could you explain a little bit about the parents' group, because that's interesting. We haven't looked a lot at youth in remote areas. I wondered if you could reflect a bit on the isolation and potential loneliness, and what your organisation does.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: Certainly. ICPA is about trying to get funding to support families who educate their children. It's parents getting together to do that. We don't really have the social events for each other. It's more about how do we put our case forward for improving funding. In a lot of ways, I see that as something of a woman's issue. My background was as a teacher but living on the farm. I live five hours north-north-west—three hours past Dubbo—on a sheep and wheat station. I've done a lot of driving. Over the years we have used Orange since 2015 to educate our three children. We had a second home. When I was educating them at home, on the farm in the schoolroom, I used a combination of distance education and registered homeschooling.

If you can imagine trying to teach three children in one room using distance education materials, you're physically isolated from other people but there's also that emotional sense of this is really hard. Our organisation, ICPA, is about trying to get needs met. There is an annual Federal allowance. I'd like to see the State Government support women—primarily women; it's 85 per cent women who educate kids in the home schoolroom on farms—to allow us some actual funding because the State Government pays the wages of teachers. That's what the education department budget is—50 per cent is teachers wages and up to 75 per cent if you look at everybody else that's involved. I don't have any super from any of those years. Nobody paid me. I am expected to do that out of my love for my children, which is wonderful. But there's no real recognition of it, whereas, if we're talking about equality, other parents have someone paid to deliver the education. If I use distance ed for those kids, the materials come out but somebody has to deliver them.

For decades Isolated Children's Parents' Association has been asking for an allowance or something. We're trying to get funding. It would be great if the State Government would come on board with that, for a body on the farm in front of those kids, delivering that education. Because that's what made me lonely. You're twisted in knots. I try to tell myself that I'm the rubber band girl. Be flexible. Remember how in COVID, it was, "Pivot. Everybody, pivot. We've all got to be able to do everything and change." That's my whole life, still. It was like that before COVID. I've got to be able to run out in the paddock and muster. I've got to be able to call the RFDS if somebody has an accident. I've got to be able to do all the farm books. I'm so busy doing all of that. I love my life too, but it's really hard to maintain your authentic self, and that's what I see. Before I came I was thinking about it. That's part of loneliness to me.

It's not just being around people, is it? Because you can be lonely in a city. You can be lonely anywhere. It's about really being able to show people who you are. For me, that's where real loneliness lies. If nobody sees you, it's really hard to feel connected. If I'm so busy turning myself inside out for everyone else that there's no time to put anything into me—because it takes me so long. It takes rural women 90 minutes on a dirt road to get to a town. It's a lovely town of 2,000 people, but everyone's working. Do you find that these days? Everyone's working so hard—so many hours—that they don't have a lot of time then to make those human connections. Does that explain?

The CHAIR: That's helpful. I'll go to Mr Barrett in a second. For your benefit, we had someone yesterday in very different circumstances. A man came and gave his lived experience. He said almost word for word what you just said about how loneliness is when you feel like you can't be your authentic self. It's quite

interesting to me. It was almost an exact replica. When we get the transcript, it will be really interesting to see. Just to make you aware, we are hearing that and we have heard that.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: You're hearing that, yes. I have felt loneliness at different stages when the children were young. When I started doing this job 10 years ago, I had made a decision about what I want to be involved in and pursued that. I made decisions about pursuing my artistic interests, my political—the ICPA. That's how I feel if I can show myself honestly like that.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I think I'd like to add to that and open up to everyone else. What's the farming experience like as well for someone that might be out in the paddock by themselves all day? They might come back and see some of their family, but their social network is quite small from day to day. I wonder if someone could share some experience on that for me.

PETER DOUGLAS: I can. Our shed is 12 kilometres west of here. The majority of our members are retired farmers. There are a couple of us blow-ins from Sydney that are shaking things up a little. As you say, they're out there slaving away all day, much like you, by themselves. They're got to make their own decisions. When they come into the shed, they don't talk about their feelings particularly. But the interesting thing I've found is some of them will just come up quietly and ask, "Peter, what you think about this?" One fellow has got a dilemma. He thinks his wife has contracted Alzheimer's and it's the old thorny question. What do we do? Do we get her committed? This is a 50-year marriage. It's really difficult. We just had a quiet chat about some options and off he went. They worked it out for themselves.

MICHELLE HOLLAND: When it comes to the education, did you have School of the Air?

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: It was once called that—School of the Air. They now call it distance ed because it relies on the internet.

MICHELLE HOLLAND: It's not like CB radio anymore?

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: It's not that anymore. It's over the internet.

MICHELLE HOLLAND: There's nothing similar for grown-ups?

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: The other hat now—the Rural Woman Cooperative does have those sorts of online sessions where you can Zoom. I join primarily for the book club, and once a month we read the same book. That's a wonderful opportunity for me, and I've made friendships through doing that online. Then they have different sorts of courses that they put forward that you can do. That works really well, and it's something. It's some sort of contact with people who, because they're also rural, understand and get it.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Helen, did you want to touch on that farmer experience?

HELEN JAMES: My aunt taught her four children by correspondence, and even now my cousin, who is a little bit younger than me, speaks of the ups and downs of it. All four children were dux of their school at boarding school, but—

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: It's very hard.

HELEN JAMES: I know one cousin came and stayed with us for about a month when her mother had to have some surgery, and she said, "I'll never forget that time in town." It's hard.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: We end up doing lots of things. These days, what you do is you get in the car and drive. My daughter has a medical condition. She is out of a wheelchair at the moment, but she decided she wants to play wheelchair basketball. I've done 10,000 kilometres or more in 10 weeks to go to Sydney for her to play. But lots of rural people just have to make those decisions. So when we say we need good roads, it's so that we can actually go and live lives that are full, rather than sitting out there and not being involved in life.

I know what you were saying about men. Long story short, my husband is also very much a farmer. He has a full farm to run but is also an electrician. He had always wanted to do that, and we had the opportunity. He became an electrician. He will do woolsheds, and he does it now for people in the district. It could be a full-time business. But I think to myself, "That's how he gets off the farm." People will talk to him and give him a cuppa. Work is such a strong focus, isn't it, for farmers? You do not need to apologise to me for not being what you think is productive. If you don't actually rest or do something enjoyable, you're not able to function or work. You don't have to be financially bringing something in for it to be valuable. I think that's such a big focus now that it overtakes our needs.

BETH GOW: I think from a fellow's point of view, for us in the sheds, men are quite hard to engage with. Women—we seek out that friendship. I think it's just natural for us to do that. For the blokes it's a little bit

more difficult. If I had a dollar for every time a man has said to me in the sheds, "If I didn't find a shed, I probably wouldn't be here now." But they've got to work that courage. One fellow said to me, "I sat outside the men's shed for half an hour to work up the courage to actually walk into that shed." He laughs now and he says, "Goodness gracious. I kick myself thinking, 'Why did I wait that long to go to the shed?'" But that's a big step for those guys to walk into a shed and then feel, "These sheds are amazing." It's the camaraderie; it's the safe spaces that they're in to say, "Hey, I don't feel that good today." It's the banter and all that sort of stuff that happens for them. But to take that step is quite a difficult step for some of these fellows, whereas women just naturally seek that out.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: If that could be something that could come out of your work—if we, as a State, could be better educated. If people could be aware that, yes, you have to take that step. It's good for your health to be around other people.

The CHAIR: We have organisations in the room that—I may be generalising; please correct me—are perhaps skewed to an older demographic. I think you said maybe 35 was yours. I'm not sure of the CWA, but I know from the men's shed we heard evidence that it was probably retirees—may be a bit more time. You're very experienced people in your communities. I wonder if you have any reflections about the experience of loneliness amongst young people and youth in your communities, or if you have any observations?

BETH GOW: I don't have any observations, but for the men's sheds we are trying to encourage those younger ones to come through now. It's sustaining those sheds. We do have some of those younger ones coming through now. When I say younger, some of them are 40 or 50.

The CHAIR: That's young.

BETH GOW: There is a group in Canberra now; they are young ones and they are doing more modern things. They've got the 3D printers and they've got the electronics. It could move away from the woodworking and the metalworking and things like that. But they certainly are looking at attracting those younger people into the sheds.

EVIDENCE OMITTED BY RESOLUTION OF THE COMMITTEE FRIDAY 7 FEBRUARY 2025.

The CHAIR: What kind of community supports or opportunities are there for people, do you think?

EVIDENCE OMITTED BY RESOLUTION OF THE COMMITTEE FRIDAY 7 FEBRUARY 2025.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: I really feel like families need to be supported, because the cost to the community from the pressures—the divorce rate. If a family is separated, then you have to have two homes. We've got a housing crisis, and how much of that need for more homes—any support that we can be given to reduce pressures on families is really important to me. I do have three young kids—well, 15, 19 and 21 years old. What I've noticed is it's quite difficult because there are not as many social situations for them to go to. Our social circuit are things like the rodeos, picnic races and agricultural events, like a field and fleece day or the local show, and preparing for those and being involved in those occurring. That's good and healthy stuff, because they will do that and get involved in it. Sport is very big, of course, everywhere. The further west you go, that's really important. But it's more events than the continuity. The internet can be really good for keeping us connected—information—but it doesn't replace community.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can I touch on those events? We saw during COVID, and I know up your way we've seen with floods and a lot of water and that sort of stuff, you see these events cancelled. You take the Cumby picnics out of that calendar, that's a big hole left. I just wonder how big an impact it has on these communities when they lose, either long term or short term, a show or a rodeo or one of these events. I'll open that up to anyone.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: From my perspective, so much time goes in by volunteers to prepare for those events. We have a field and fleece day, and everything will be done—people come together, and in the weeks leading up to it there's a committee that will have a chat group and meet online, so a lot of work goes into it. Without those events, it's very hard for people to justify the time. I can remember 20 years ago, you'd go on a Saturday night to the tennis court, and people would drive 40 to 50 minutes to the tennis court on a Saturday night. Who has the time to do that anymore? That's because there are fewer people in the country on farms to do the jobs. We need help with staffing. The ICPA would like to see visas extended in particular things that I could provide you with details about. If we had more people, that's one of the things that you need. I know we talk about it's just not about being around people. I know if I've been on the farm for six weeks, and then I drive, I get into Dubbo, I get on a plane and I get out in Sydney, it just overwhelms me—the smell of people, the proximity of them, the noise. It's like, woah.

The CHAIR: We tried not to bring too much with us.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: It makes me think, if I was around people—you must have some sort of research about what that does to us as human beings, not having that contact with people. If we could have as much support as the State Government can give us to try to maintain populations, because there are those figures that you can find that show the predictions. Towns like Walgett and Brewarrina, those numbers are going down and they're predicted to go down. Nyngan, Bourke, I think they're just going to maintain—just.

The CHAIR: We had a very interesting witness earlier speaking about the government program to encourage essential workers into the area, but what was interesting about it in the context of this is how much support is required to get people to stay and connect them.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: Yes.

The CHAIR: It raises for me an interesting paradox, because I think there's a general perception about regional or rural country life that part of the attraction of it is that there's an in-built community that you could just drop into. You're in the city and, yes, there are people around but you're quite isolated because everyone's doing their thing. There's this kind of idealised view that you come to the country, you drop yourself into the community and there's a community there. It's interesting to hear from you about how while that could be there, these barriers to connecting—

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: If we want to have a doctor or a GP come to a small town out west, if they have a family, they need child care.

ANNE-MAREE DAVIS: They need housing.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: And they need housing, exactly. That's really important to support them in that way. All of those extra things need to be thought about, not just so that we have a doctor but then so that the community is connected. There are so many complexities involved in that. There are pay differences then between early childhood—child care is such a difficult area because an early childhood educator isn't getting the incentives because they're paid through a Federal thing, but teachers are getting these incentives to go out west because it's a State payment. Could the State please add some incentives towards early childhood teachers?

The CHAIR: We'll talk to the Feds.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: Somebody needs to pay the money for it, but our communities would be better for it.

GLENDA GAVIN: My experience is that I've lived on a property for nearly 45 years. I came there as quite a young wife from the city, and I've found that you have to go out and join things. People are not going to come to you for what you've just detailed. Back then you didn't have Netflix and internet and all that, so you go out and you make your social connections. I think the CWA plays a part—I didn't join then—in new people moving to the area. They want to make social connections so they will join local groups, but the groups have to be there. Whereas there are so many less organisations around than what there was then for people to go to.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: Branches close.

GLENDA GAVIN: Like the Lions Club, Apex and all those sorts of things, they're not as strong as they used to be. But then, I don't really know who's to blame for that. It's just people don't want to be involved in those sorts of things. It's not necessarily that there is less people. It's just people's ideas are different or their jobs are different. There is perhaps not as many rural workers. They're working, so they're travelling an hour to Orange to work and that, so therefore they don't want to spend the time going to other things outside of work, plus then you've also got the influence of social media as well, which might fill a gap as well.

Going back, say, 40 years ago, there might have been four banks in the town. Now there are no banks at all. You go to the post office, if there is a post office. There are no post offices, and now they're in the newsagents. Each year, a bank would put on a junior, and that junior has probably come from the city, and then they might stay there and they might marry a local. Society is just so different to what it was. Even talking about men on the farms, my town actually is Canowindra and there was a saleyard. I think it was every fortnight, on a Friday, there was the sheep sales. The men would come, bring their sheep in. They probably came in even if they didn't have sheep, just to meet up.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes, we used to go up here just tyre kicking at this one.

GLENDA GAVIN: Yes, so all the towns had them, and there'd be a local organisation—it could be the CWA, it could be a church group or any group—that would have a stall there and they would serve tea, and the men would congregate. That doesn't happen now. You've got to go out to the livestock exchange out near Blayney. I don't know how that operates; I've never been there. Or there are bigger saleyards. It's just different. Society is just different. There are not the same opportunities for social connections.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can I just come back to what you said about clubs? Keeping in mind, we're looking for what we can do to move this forward. Is it harder now to start up those clubs? There are going to be time issues; I know that. But is it harder now to start up or run those clubs than it was 20, 30, 40 years ago that means that there is less of them around?

ANNE-MAREE DAVIS: I don't think it's harder to run. Our demographic is, like I said, 40 to 80. We can't get the younger ones in because they think, "That's an old person's club. That's an old person's organisation." They don't want to try and get involved in things like that. The dynamic we're looking at trying to get in there are the ones that are like 25 to 35, so that then they can pick up the reins and keep it going, but they just don't want to join. It's hard to get new people in.

HELEN JAMES: I came to the Orange branch because the demographics have changed in Nashdale, and there were so many young people, and also it's difficult because they changed to an evening branch or a six o'clock branch, and their meetings were so quick. It was like a long table, a bottle of wine and some cheese, and a very quick meeting, and that's good. This is the thing with young people. They don't want long, drawn-out meetings.

PETER DOUGLAS: Nor do us older people either.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can we have our meetings like that?

The CHAIR: You're talking to people who have been to a lot of political party meetings as well. We are very scarred.

HELEN JAMES: You can look at the correspondence online. I'll be sent it. A lot can be done online, which is, you know—but their meetings may be a little bit short. This is the thing: I don't think young people want to go somewhere where there's a long, drawn-out meeting, be it night or day. But this is one of the things that we're missing for the older people—that a lot of the CWA meetings are meeting late afternoon, five o'clock or six o'clock and there are no day meetings. In Orange, there's no meeting. Here we are, 40,000 population, and there's no CWA meeting in the daytime. This is what we probably need.

MICHELLE HOLLAND: I'm on the committee for the u3a, University of the Third Age. Education is your first age. Working life is your second age. Retirement is your third age. I don't know how many members—over 100 members, and we have hour-long courses. Music appreciation, art appreciation; learning French, Russian history, Australian history, how to do a cryptic crossword—they're all hour-long courses and you can stick around afterwards. They go for a hard lemonade afterwards or a cup of coffee at the Orange Seniors Village Hub, ranging in age from 50 to 90—we've had 100-year-old members—and male and female.

They're all coming together—we've just had a registration day and I'm teaching people how to use iPads. The grandkids have said, "Here, grandma, have an iPad. I have an iPhone", and they're frightened. They've had this much life and such little technology, whereas children have had this much life and so much technology. So I'm showing them how to be brave and not be scared of it. With the older generation—and they've got the grandkids. Sometimes the grandkids come and sit at the back of the room with their technology. They're learning about Banjo Patterson. They're going on excursions around things—

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: So are they happy to spend the time doing that then?

MICHELLE HOLLAND: Yes, seeing as they've all come in and registered for the set number of courses. Yes, there's a course on pretty much every day and then we also have social afternoon teas or morning teas downstairs here, and we have 40-odd people coming in who stay for lunch.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: Yes, I've heard it's good. I've got a friend who does that and has said how good it is.

MICHELLE HOLLAND: I'm organising a conference at the moment happening here in April and we're hoping to get over 100 people from New South Wales and some from across the other States. They all come together for long talks. They're not meetings. You call it a meeting and—

The CHAIR: Can I ask a question, which is a response to a bit of the discussions. Ms Whigham-Reid, you were talking about the rural women's cooperative and their online presence, which we heard about in previous evidence. Ms Holland, are any of those hour-long courses—are they all face to face or are they online?

MICHELLE HOLLAND: We have Zoom options. We have someone in Canberra who interviews a politician or a journalist or an educator and they're all Zoom meetings. We have the option to set up a monitor in the hub so we can all watch and learn and listen together.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: There's an organisation called Motherland. I asked a few other rural people and one mum commented to me how those sorts of online supports—have you heard of Motherland?

The CHAIR: No, I haven't.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: They have parents groups, mothers groups in different age—like, how old are your children. They have a cohort of those mums. So it's like a mums group but online. There's a cost involved but that runs it. That mother said to me how good that is as an online option—that they really value that.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: It's been raised a few times that it can often be hard to drag people in—people won't reach out, whether its guys with men's sheds or the example that Mrs James cited. I'm just wondering, when it's really apparent that someone could use—instinctively you can see that they could use a degree of social connectedness but there is a reluctance to do so, whether it's anxiety or cynicism or time. Do you think there's anything that you can do as organisations or the Government can do to reach in a little better with those people and draw them into the services that are there?

HELEN JAMES: I think the CWA does in Orange—they do advertise. But I think it's more than that. It depends. Different CWAs—there are so many CWA branches, but it depends on the branch, I think, in a lot of ways. I think Glenda would agree with that. We have 8,000 members and 400 groups in New South Wales, but no—I don't think—branches are alike. So many branches have so many—many of them are in remote areas. Others are in more regional areas like Orange. What do you think, Glenda?

GLENDA GAVIN: I think Mr Nanva is asking how the Government could help. I'm presuming that's financially, is it?

The CHAIR: Well, not only.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: I raised this in an earlier session. It may be there's no answer to this or an immediate answer. But in the earlier session I raised the example of the local government area that I'm from and a lot of neighbourhood centres from my part of town who have a lot of great initiatives and they publicise them and they go out there to try to deliver them. I just see that the uptake is really pretty low and disappointingly low. I don't think that's because there's a lack of prevalence of loneliness or social isolation where I live. I just think it's because of either time constraints, where people just can't get out to them, or a genuine cynicism about the value of it.

GLENDA GAVIN: I'll give you an example of people not wanting to go to things. It was a very disappointing experience just in December. Where I work they've got a social club and I'd say there could be 200 or 300 members. We had the Christmas function and I think there was—six members turned up with their families. It was very disappointing.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: How can we crash through that?

GLENDA GAVIN: I don't know. People just don't want to go to things. You can't force people to attend.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: No.

GLENDA GAVIN: But, for example, I'll just talk about something else. Going back to the CWA, Canowindra CWA about three years ago at the start of this initiative that they would have—once a month they'd have a morning tea and I think it started off with 12 people. They're having to limit the numbers now because there are so many coming. It's no cost involved. You can make a voluntary donation if you want. If you're lacking transport, somebody could pick you up. The majority of the women that go are not CWA members and they can range from—I've been a couple of times. I don't really need to go because—I don't know if I'm really the target group but, anyway, they're getting young mothers. I know in the school holidays they can bring their kids with them. That could happen—30 to 40 women just there in the small CWA room. There are a few men come along to the morning tea. It's not restricted just to women and that has made quite an impact, I think, on some isolation within the Canowindra community.

The CHAIR: Thank you, that's a good example. I appreciate that.

GLENDA GAVIN: I don't know how the Government can—

The CHAIR: We're puzzling through. It's an open question.

PETER DOUGLAS: With our shed, we get a steady trickle of new members, and then half a dozen will come out and look us over, and I think that is, basically, recommendations from their wives: "Get out of the house and do something."

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: "You need to be somewhere else."

The CHAIR: I've got to say I'm going to go home and tell my husband he's joining the men's shed.

PETER DOUGLAS: It's the best thing you could tell him.

MICHELLE HOLLAND: We've just introduced railway history into one of our courses. Oh, my god, we've got a change in demographics into our courses, as well. Add a bit of muscle and trains, and you've got a whole new audience.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: I think wives know that it's good for their husbands to go and do it, so the wives make it happen, and you were saying, before, you made a choice, you decide to get up and go and do things, and I did the same thing. Can we educate our community that this is as important for you? If you found a lump or you had a sunspot, you're not going to keep looking at it and going, "Gee, that's a sunspot." You're going to go to do something about that, aren't you? You're going to go to the doctor. You're going to get a referral. You're going to get it checked. If you're experiencing loneliness, sitting and feeling that loneliness is as good for you as just looking at a sunspot. You have to act. I'm sure you could get a good media organisation to flesh that out. If people understood the risk to the health, of it, that, once you go over that cliff, it's a downhill run. Once you start to have those feelings, if you don't act, do something proactive—

GLENDA GAVIN: That's right, Heather, just like Mr Nanva was saying about how can the Government help. Perhaps run a media campaign on the benefits of social connection.

MICHELLE HOLLAND: A good one.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: Do you think there's a bigger role for primary health care in taking social connectedness a little more seriously, as well?

GLENDA GAVIN: Primary health care as in doctors?

The Hon. BOB NANVA: The doctors, GPs. We had evidence, earlier this afternoon, that in the UK, I think, they're trialling this idea of social prescriptions. When people show up, it's not just a sort of medical treatment but a—

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: I would say more so than just GPs and doctors. We should do that for each other. I really love living in Orange. We have these neighbours who are amazing, and I can say to them, "This person is a bit sad about this." "No worries. I'll have a word." There's that sort of connectedness, in my experience, even in Orange, that people will do that for each other. So I think that, if we as a community understood you might need to do that for someone and made that socially acceptable to say, "Why don't we do this together?", then it's a big shift. I know that the education department is seeing a huge shift in how children turn up to kindy or grade 1, that our use of technology has overwhelmed our ability to interact, even with the little people before they go to school. That was a Federal education person in Canberra. They've got data. And somebody coincidentally was saying, as a teacher in the classroom, kids turn up, they can't hold a pen but they can swipe. So that sort of an education about how to have the social skills—this is what we do for each other as humans.

The CHAIR: Can I go to Mrs James?

HELEN JAMES: Just after I was asked to come here, I rang a friend. I owed her the phone call. I rang a friend—I can't use her name—a very astute member of the wider community, and the first thing she said to me on the phone was, "Oh, Helen, I feel so lonely", and I said, "Oh, do you?" or something to that effect, and I knew her husband was ill, and I knew that he was about to go into—I think her husband had gone into respite, and she said, "No, he needs 24-hour care", and she said, "I'm just at home"—on a property just out of Orange. And then she said, "It's just dreadful." She was leading a nice social life et cetera. How do I explain it? And she said, "Now I'm going to the hospital or the nursing home, care home, every day, about 12.00, to feed him, and then I come home."

She can't get any help. It's not a minor detail, because she has a problem herself. But she did have people coming in to help her with her husband before he went into care, and now she's struggling along herself and spending the time going backwards and forwards. She's a very fine woman and has done a lot in the community. But she kept talking. She kept mentioning this loneliness. And this, I think, is a big thing with going from home into care, for the spouse. And I know it's happening with my youngest sister, but not to that extent. It should be part and parcel of admission to aged care particularly.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: To consider the spouse.

HELEN JAMES: And it needs just—

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: I love what you did. You said, "I owed her a phone call."

HELEN JAMES: I did. I owed her a phone call.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: But people even my age don't say that, and certainly younger don't say that, but I think it's those social skills—I think it's wonderful.

HELEN JAMES: I did owe her a phone call. But do you know what I did today? You came into this room and said hello to me, and I was just sitting down, and you sat in front of me. I hadn't met you. You introduced yourself, and I didn't say, "Come and sit next to me."

The CHAIR: This might be a good moment to say we're approaching the end of our session. We've had some really valuable insights and personal experiences, which I appreciate. I wonder if there are quite short concluding suggestions, comments or thoughts you'd like to leave the Committee with before we wrap up. I would ask that they're brief so that we can do a quick whip around the table, starting with Mr Douglas.

PETER DOUGLAS: When I joined the men's shed four years ago, you had fight for bench space to build or create something. I took over the presidency last July so I'm seeing it in a whole different light. I'm finding now that the guys are actually talking to each other—maybe not so much construction. Also, you maybe get one or two or three are sitting over there and they're having quite intense discussions, not about politics or anything but about something that's affecting them, their children or something. It's got quite a different vibe now. I like it.

BETH GOW: Yes, I think the sheds are morphing and they're changing. We say "health by stealth". So these guys talk just like this, shoulder to shoulder not face to face, and they are learning to be comfortable in that space to talk amongst themselves. If I can just throw out the last comment, there are more men's sheds than McDonald's.

The CHAIR: Oh, I love that. Good job. I'm taking away quite a bit today and that will be one that stays in my head.

BETH GOW: Yes, by about a hundred and something, there are more men's sheds than McDonald's.

MICHELLE HOLLAND: For U3A, I've printed these off and I'm putting them in doctors' surgeries, in hospitals, in committee, in the library and in halls—that sort of thing. It's a quick pick-up to take away with them with all the details on it. It's a very handy thing. For VIEW and U3A, there's a new Facebook page and photos all the time.

The CHAIR: You're utilising those probably old-fashioned tools like the flyer, but also Facebook.

MICHELLE HOLLAND: Yes, they like the physical, takeaway, put-it-on-the-fridge kind of thing.

ANNE-MAREE DAVIS: I'd like to see what we spoke about earlier: an awareness program of how dangerous loneliness can be for people. I think that's necessary not just for older people but for younger people as well, because there are a lot of younger people out there that just don't know how to ask, "How are you today?" or "Can I come with you today?" or "Do you want to get a coffee?". They just don't know how to do it.

MICHELLE HOLLAND: And they don't know how to make a phone call.

ANNE-MAREE DAVIS: Yes, so to come out of all of this, an awareness program of some sort.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: Yes, definitely. There is a cost to our community from loneliness that's financial and economic, as well as in our hearts. It is heartbreaking, isn't it?

HELEN JAMES: It's not the money.

HEATHER WHIGHAM-REID: Well, that's it. There's the double cost. It's financial but it's also in our hearts. The people that we lose and certainly the rural men, and also children. As a farm woman I would say that there's a lot to be gained from supporting people and getting rid of this old idea that they wear Akubra, they're wearing R. M. Williams. Every farm has got debt. People are struggling to just educate their kids. Instead of resenting us—every farm woman I know is like the duck paddling like crazy underneath. Anything that the State Government can do to support country women doing those roles will help us to not feel so lonely. You can get so lonely you just want to leave. Our numbers are going down out west, because it just gets too hard. That's a good outcome if you just leave the bush; that's better than the suicides, so I would like to see funding.

GLENDA GAVIN: I'd like to see that parents are encouraged to encourage their children to become involved in activities like as in the past with the Scouts and the Girl Guides and all those other organisations to keep them alive—try and keep these organisations going. Apart from taking away the loneliness aspect, it also teaches skills. I think that's what's missing now; there are not those organisations being as well-supported. Probably every one of us in this room have got children, nieces or nephews who are not involved in these things.

You think, "Why is it that they're not doing the things that we used to do?" I think we need to get back to those basic organisations and become more involved in community.

HELEN JAMES: I agree with that, and also to prioritise raising awareness and reducing stigma around social isolation and loneliness. I very much agree with Glenda on that.

The CHAIR: I want to take this chance to once again thank you so much for your willingness to be here to speak about your own experiences and to travel to be here, and to let you know that that we will take everything into consideration during the report. I think the reflection from me from being in Orange is there are some incredible similarities with loneliness and socialisation. It doesn't matter if you're in the city where I live or out here, but there are those peculiarities about living somewhere where you don't have the same access to transport and other things. It's an interesting mix of both—the similarity across the human experience but also those contextual factors which do make it quite unique to be out away from metro areas. I appreciate you bringing those to light very much today. Again, thank you so much for your time.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 16:00.