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Dedicated to a better Brisbane

4 August 2021

Committee Secretary
Community Support and Services Committee
Parliament House
George Street
BRISBANE QLD 4000
CSSC@parliament.qld.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary

Thank you for providing Brisbane City Council (Council) with the opportunity to provide feedback on the Community Support and Services Committee's Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland (the inquiry).

Council acknowledges the significant impact that the COVID-19 pandemic (the pandemic) has, and continues to have, on our communities, particularly the increased social isolation of vulnerable residents.

Anecdotally, residents and community organisations have advised Council that increased isolation during the pandemic was particularly experienced by vulnerable residents (including international students, newly arrived migrants and refugees, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents, seniors, young people, people with disability and people from diverse cultural backgrounds). Experiences of isolation were primarily due to:

- reduced interaction with other members of the public due to being identified by the Australian Government Department of Health as a 'vulnerable resident'
- reduced interaction with other vulnerable residents with whom they were unable to maintain contact during the pandemic
- digital exclusion (where residents don't have access to data, devices, or the knowledge to use them)
- closure of community facilities, programs and support groups due to the pandemic
- reduced income for those who experienced reduced employment due to the pandemic.

According to a meta-analysis co-authored by Ms Julianne Holt-Lunstad, PhD, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young University, lack of social connection heightens health risks as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day or having alcohol use disorder. She has also found that loneliness and social isolation are twice as harmful to physical and mental health as obesity.¹

¹ Holt-Lunstad, J. *Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2015.

Major contributing factors to isolation include the following:

- Social: Living alone, loss of significant other, family separation, few friends, being a caregiver for spouse
- Psychological: Depression, anxiety, dementia
- Physical: Poor health, serious illness, decreased mobility, loss of independence
- Economic: Limited financial resources
- Logistical: Loss of driver's licence, lack of transportation.²

Risk factors to social isolation are addressed through *A City for Everyone: Inclusive Brisbane Plan 2019-2029* (the Plan) which is Council's long-term plan for more inclusive communities. The plan lists 101 actions that will help mitigate social isolation and loneliness. These actions are informed by the following five pillars that Council believes contribute greatly to healthier communities.

1. The Travel pillar

The Travel pillar aims to ensure Brisbane is a city where everyone moves around safely and easily. Council is creating more travel options, including accessible public transport and an expanded network of paths for pedestrians and cyclists, and wheelchair, pram and mobility device users, so residents can get home quicker and safer. The Plan highlights that up to a third of Australians with disability say a lack of access to transport can be a significant barrier to inclusion. Studies show that people with lower incomes rely more heavily on public transport. Older people are also more likely to walk or take the bus, train or ferry than drive.³

Council recognises that good transport infrastructure and service provision is a key determinant in building inclusive neighbourhoods. As well as providing an extensive network of bus and ferry services, Council provides Personalised Public Transport services to help connect people to their local transport hubs. Using wheelchair accessible maxi cabs, these services operate in areas where TransLink services are limited.

Council has also continued to offer the Council Cabs service, which organises shared taxis at scheduled times for residents who find it difficult to get to their local shops where they can interact with others.

The Queensland Government also has a key role to play in addressing social inclusion through transport. The Queensland Government's Department of Transport and Main Roads has State-wide responsibility for public transport and the inquiry provides the Queensland Government with a particular opportunity to review the public transport network and consider ways in which it can further enhance social inclusion across Queensland. This may be through amendments to the fare structure, community access to service information, investigation of local service/network improvements and public transport infrastructure that connects regions. First and last-mile access, including integration with other services such as taxis, ride share and e-mobility options, also has a role in improving social inclusion.

² Fakoya, O.A., McCorry, N.K. & Donnelly, M. *Loneliness and social isolation interventions for older adults: a scoping review of reviews*. BMC Public Health, 2020, viewed 8 July 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-8251-6>.

³ Arup, *Shaping Ageing Cities: 10 European case studies*, Help Age International, London, 2015, viewed 27 July 2019, <https://www.arup.com>.

2. The Work pillar

The Work pillar aims to ensure Brisbane is a city where everyone benefits from a strong economy. Council is creating a city of neighbourhoods by partnering with local businesses to bring unused space to life, while also encouraging local business owners to embrace inclusion with employment opportunities and great service for all.

The Plan highlights that older residents are working later in life, while people with disability are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed and half as likely to have a full-time job, compared to Australians without disability.⁴ People who have been in Australia for less than five years and are from a non-English speaking background may also require additional supportive pathways.

Council provides a number of employment programs as well as support to local businesses to ensure they can continue to operate and provide employment opportunities for residents.

In response to the impacts of the pandemic, *Brisbane's Economic Recovery Plan* details how Council is partnering with businesses, industry groups, community groups and residents to restore the city to its vibrant best. Initiatives include the following.

- \$4.5 million for waived rents and reimbursements for Council lessees and tenants.
- \$3 million in direct assistance for community groups on Council land.
- Rates deferrals and payment plans for those experiencing hardship due to the pandemic.
- Temporarily turned off almost 1,000 parking meters and relaxed parking enforcement activity to assist essential workers.
- Supporting community groups to establish donation programs that distribute food and digital devices to vulnerable residents.
- Work with Brisbane businesses to retain jobs in Brisbane and grow investment.
- Youth employment support through programs such as genYOU Inspire.

Council encourages the Queensland Government to extend support for businesses struggling during the pandemic to ensure that people have access to employment so that they can:

- remain connected to a sense of purpose
- be engaged in workplace relationships that build social connections
- retain access to income to be able to fund the things that matter most to them.

3. The Live pillar

The Live pillar aims to ensure Brisbane is a city where everyone can live and relax. Council is building infrastructure for the future, including offering better housing choices while protecting our unique lifestyle, local greenspace and parks.

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia*, Cat. No. 4430.0.10.001, ABS, Canberra, 2016.

The Plan highlights that there is a 60% possibility of a house being occupied by an individual with disability.⁵ While Council provides a number of programs that respond to homelessness (including the Pathways out of Homelessness \$3 million grant program) and improve housing accessibility (such as the Universal Housing Incentive), Council encourages the Queensland Government to invest in the provision of additional social and affordable housing to ensure residents have stability of housing, particularly to reduce social isolation. This may include investment in co-housing and multi-generational developments.

Council facilities such as libraries, pools, community halls and Active and Healthy programs have all been critical in sustaining social connections. Each service has adapted to changing regulations, which have impacted the number of people that participate; however, residents have continued to provide feedback that they highly value these facilities remaining open to provide opportunities for recreation and socialisation.

Council encourages the Queensland Government to extend subsidy schemes to ensure that access to community facilities is possible for people, particularly those on low incomes who are socially isolated. This may include ensuring that care and support packages for vulnerable residents include funding to community and recreational activities and groups.

4. The Enjoy pillar

The Enjoy pillar aims to ensure Brisbane is a city where everyone can enjoy exciting lifestyle and leisure opportunities. Council is creating more to see and do in a clean and green Brisbane with more opportunities to enjoy Brisbane's beautiful climate and connect with family and friends in the places that make our city great.

The Plan highlights that 45% of Australians will experience a mental health condition in their lifetime.⁶ Inclusive leisure activities and healthy lifestyles promote positive mental and physical wellbeing. Physical inactivity is the fifth leading cause of preventable death in Australia.⁷ Those with disability are less inclined to participate in sport, recreation or cultural activities due to the lack of inclusiveness, which is why it is important that these activities are accessible and respect difference.

As an example of Council services, the Home Library Service experienced an increase in demand during the pandemic with people experiencing medical vulnerabilities receiving books delivered to their home. From February 2020 to March 2021, the service saw a 400% increase in new customers (to 947 people). Customers highlighted that the delivery of library materials meant they were occupied during isolation and felt connected to Council, as staff took the time to understand their needs.

Council encourages the Queensland Government to extend funding toward the provision of mental health services and interventions, including access to acute and secondary mental health services, and supporting health professionals to connect clients to community activities that build well-being and social connections.

⁵ Livable Housing Australia, Livable Housing Design Guidelines, *Livable Housing Australia*, Forest Lodge, 2017, viewed 27 July 2019, <http://www.livablehousingaustralia.org.au>.

⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Mental health services in Australia, AIHW, Canberra, 2017, viewed 27 July 2019, <https://www.aihw.gov.au>.

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, General Social Survey, Cat. No. 4159.0, ABS, Canberra, 2015.

5. The Connect pillar

The Connect pillar aims to ensure Brisbane is a city where everyone feels they belong and can have their say. Council is supporting emerging businesses and communities while providing access to information and opportunities.

Feeling welcome within your community reduces the feeling of isolation. The Plan highlights that some Australians lack meaningful relationships, with one in 10 Australians lacking social support and one in six experiencing emotional loneliness.⁸

Council continues to fund community programs and partnerships with local organisations to ensure residents connect with neighbouring residents. Council supported community organisations including libraries, ward offices and resident groups to distribute 16,000 Neighbour Day packs in March 2021 to help facilitate conversations with neighbours.

Council encourages the Queensland Government to increase funding to community centres as vital hubs for residents to connect. Council also encourages the Queensland Government to extend grant programs that provide funding for community-based services that meet the social needs of vulnerable residents.

Council's Library Services, Lifestyle and Community Services, recently delivered Tech Connect for Seniors programs, providing digital literacy skills to 229 participants in February and March 2021. Older residents have identified a continued desire to stay digitally connected through online meeting technology, particularly where family and friends may be located in other cities or countries where travel is uncertain.

While Council continues to provide digital education to isolated residents, the 2016 Census identified that 38,000 households in Brisbane had no access to internet (including from mobile phones).⁹ Council encourages the Queensland Government to invest in the provision of internet and devices to vulnerable residents to ensure they can retain social connections, particularly in periods of lockdown or other pandemic-related restrictions.

Council acknowledges that all levels of government, businesses and communities have a role in supporting the reduction in social isolation, particularly among vulnerable residents.

If you have any questions, or would like to discuss Council's feedback, please contact Mr Ryan Foster, Social Inclusion Strategy Manager, Inclusive Communities, Connected Communities, Lifestyle and Community Services, on [REDACTED] or via email at [REDACTED]

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide feedback on the inquiry.

Yours sincerely



Colin Jensen
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

⁸ Relationships Australia, Is Australia experiencing an epidemic of loneliness? Relationships Australia, Kingston, 2018, viewed 27 July 2019, <https://www.relationships.org.au>.

⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016 Census QuickStats, ABS, Canberra, 2017, viewed 27 July 2019, <http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au>.