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Dear Karl

Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland

The Heart Foundation welcomes the opportunity to provide our perspective on social isolation and loneliness in Queensland and its impact on cardiovascular disease and health outcomes.

Social isolation, or the state of having minimal contact with others, and loneliness can affect mental and physical health and increase the risk of heart disease. There is now an understanding that it is a public health issue that needs addressing.

The World Health Organization lists lack of social support networks as a determinant of health. The Heart Foundation includes lack of quality social support and social isolation as major risk factors for cardiovascular disease, alongside other major risk factors of physical inactivity, unhealthy eating, smoking, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

In this submission, the Heart Foundation will provide evidence on why the following recommendations are a priority to address social isolation and loneliness in Queensland.

Heart Foundation Recommendations:

- 1. The Heart Foundation strongly recommends increased funding to support the Queensland Walking Strategy and Queensland Cycling Strategy to increase physical activity, social connection, and active travel.**
- 2. The Heart Foundation strongly recommends further planning reforms and investment in infrastructure and green spaces to enhance our built environments to promote social connection, health, and active living for all Queenslanders.**
- 3. The Heart Foundation strongly recommends that the Queensland Government reinvests in the Heart Foundation Walking program from 30 June 2022 to support vulnerable groups; in particular older people and First Nations people.**
- 4. The Heart Foundation strongly supports the development of a state-wide Social Isolation and Loneliness Strategy to strengthen a whole of government and community response.**

Nature and extent of the impact of social isolation and loneliness in Queensland

- Most Australians will experience loneliness at some point in their lives¹.
- In 2018, about one in 4 people reported they are currently experiencing an episode of loneliness and one in 2 people reported they feel lonely for at least one day each week².
- There is evidence that poor social relationships are associated with higher mortality rates from all causes.^{3,4}
- There is a close relationship between depression and social isolation, with both having a major impact on the quality of life as well as mortality.⁵
- Social isolation and loneliness are associated with increased risk of developing cardiovascular disease and poorer prognoses.^{3,4}
- The influence of social relationships on mortality is comparable with well-established risk factors, including physical inactivity and obesity.⁴
- A 2020 survey in response to COVID-19 restrictions found 45% of respondents either agreed (26%) or strongly agreed (19%) that they often felt lonely.⁶
- Early evidence of the direct and indirect psychological consequences of COVID-19, both from the infectious disease and associated public policy is emerging. Such anxieties can motivate suboptimal behavioural changes that can shape population cardiovascular health in ways that may have unintended consequences, including disengagement with the health care system or treatment non-adherence.⁷
- Older people are particularly vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness, negatively impacting on their health and wellbeing.⁸
- First Nations people face more and unique social, cultural, and financial barriers to engaging in physical activity. Some environmental factors include geographical location (urban, regional, remote) and environmental factors such as feeling unsafe and unwelcome to walk in neighbourhoods.⁹
- Queensland faces particular challenges because it has one of the most regionalised populations in Australia; with 38% living in regional and remote parts of the state. There are ongoing disparities in the health of people in regional and remote areas compared to urban dwellers. An ageing population is one of the key issues for regions.

Protective factors known to mitigate social isolation and loneliness

Mental health has an important role in the development and prognosis of coronary heart disease.⁹ Research indicates that there is a link between anxiety, depression, and heart disease.^{4,5,9} Having social connections, healthy personal relationships and being part of a community are essential to maintain mental health. A sense of place, safety, belonging and participation within the community are necessary for physical and mental wellbeing.

The Heart Foundation submission emphasises three critical protective factors to mitigate social isolation and loneliness:

1. Physical activity

2. Active and healthy environments

3. Supportive programs

Physical activity:

- Physical activity is critical to maintain people's physical, social, and mental and quality of life.
- Exercising for 150 minutes per week has been linked to dramatically reduced risk of chronic disease; including cardiovascular disease, falls and cognitive impairment. It is also proven to enhance physiological wellbeing by improving mood, reducing depression and anxiety and has positive impacts on reducing social isolation through enhancing social connections.¹⁰
- Physical activity has even been recognised as an evidence-based treatment for clinical anxiety and depression and may reduce destructive and anti-social behaviour. The vast array of positive benefits has been suggested in part due to the combination of activity as well as from sociocultural aspects that accompany physical activity if done alongside other people.¹¹
- As people age, they are vulnerable to not maintaining enough physical activity for their physical and mental wellbeing. Appropriate environmental and social support is needed, including walkable communities and accessible outdoor spaces that facilitate social engagement.¹²

Active and healthy environments:

- Vibrant neighbourhoods have a well-distributed network of natural areas, as well as walkable and attractive public open spaces. These spaces allow the community to be active to meet, play, chat and connect.
- During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, people continue to demonstrate their need for physical activity and healthy built environments by going out in their thousands during lockdowns and restrictions, seeking out walking and cycling paths, parks, and other open green spaces.
- Physical activity has been one of the four to five permitted activities during hard lockdowns during the COVID-19 epidemic. The easy availability of walking to almost everyone has seen engagement with local neighbourhood areas, enabling people to start or maintain a healthy habit through localised walking.
- Environments impact on people's physical activity levels as well as social isolation, loneliness, and sense of place. For example, increased levels of active living were observed among Queenslanders who lived in residential areas with greater accessibility to essential services.⁹
- The Heart Foundation recommends that communities are designed and built around Healthy Active by Design principles –
- <https://www.healthyactivebydesign.com.au/design-features/public-open-spaces>
- <https://www.healthyactivebydesign.com.au/healthy-active-ageing/active-ageing/evidence/social-participation/>
- <https://www.healthyactivebydesign.com.au/healthy-active-ageing/active-ageing/evidence/respect-and-social-inclusion/>

Kerri's story after walking changed her life



Photo courtesy: Lachie Millard Photography

"I felt very motivated after the birth of my third child and started gradually walking more each day. I lost 35 kilos, my resting heart rate came right down, and I had no post-natal depression, which I put down to walking. But it wasn't easy, and I found many footpaths too narrow or damaged to walk on, especially with a pram and small children. But walking is such a great thing to do, so uplifting. You never ever come in contact with someone walking who isn't happy."

Supportive programs:

- Heart Foundation Walking <https://walking.heartfoundation.org.au/> and other programs such as 10,000 Steps; provide physical activity and social connection opportunities. These free programs are a convenient and accessible option for referral by health professionals to encourage the uptake of more physical activity.
- The WHO recommends that policy makers create environments that enable older people to maintain mobility through physical activity by providing exercise programs to address cardiorespiratory fitness, muscle strength and balance and resistance training; especially for the very old and those recovering from acute health events.¹²

Effective responses to social isolation and loneliness:

- Multiple studies have found that assessing social isolation and loneliness in clinical settings can help to identify people at greater risk of poor outcomes. Attempts to enhance social support and reduce isolation should be encouraged.¹¹
- A 2019 study of 6,157 people found walking was significantly associated with lower levels of both social isolation and loneliness. This research provides evidence that suggests establishing walking programs may decrease the risk of loneliness.¹³

Current investment by the Queensland Government & others that may be leveraged to prevent, mitigate, and address social isolation and loneliness:

- **The Queensland Walking Strategy** is a positive example of a whole of government response to supporting people to walk more through providing the infrastructure and way finding to support walking and encourage population behaviour change.
- The Queensland Government led the way through this innovative program, however, in the last Queensland Budget, did not allocate adequate funding to the next Action Plan. More and ongoing spending on infrastructure and programs is needed to support active transport and physical activity and the social connection that this promotes.
- **The Queensland Cycling Strategy** continues to strongly support cycling and e-mobility through investment in infrastructure, programs, and legislative reforms.

Recommendation 1:

The Heart Foundation strongly recommends increased funding to support the Queensland Walking Strategy and Queensland Cycling Strategy to increase physical activity, social connection, and active travel.

- **Planning reforms** resulting in a new Model Code for Neighbourhood Design is a progressive response by the Queensland Government to encouraging better neighbourhood design. The new code aims to facilitate the creation of walkable neighbourhoods that support healthy and active communities; and a neighbourhood design and layout that creates well-integrated, well-serviced, compact and connected neighbourhoods - <https://dsdmipprd.blob.core.windows.net/general/model-code-for-neighbourhood-design.pdf>

Health Active by Design is a resource for our community to utilise to design and plan healthier and more active communities - [Healthy Active by Design](#)

The way the environment is designed, planned, and built can affect how physically active people will choose to be. Towns and cities, neighbourhoods, public spaces and places, shopping areas, and town and neighbourhood centres designed for all stages of life will result in greater use and physical activity; and provide for increased social interaction and inclusion. This can improve health outcomes, especially greater levels of general well-being and fitness.

Recommendation 2:

The Heart Foundation strongly recommends further planning reforms and investment in infrastructure and green spaces to enhance our built environments to promote social connection, health, and active living for all Queenslanders.

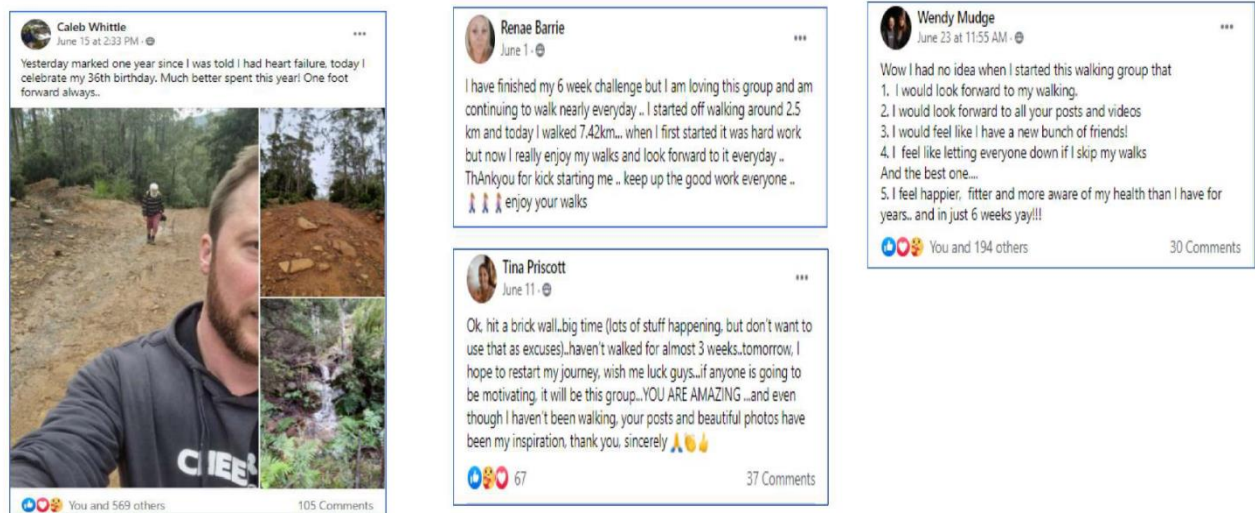
- **The Heart Foundation Walking program**, will lose its funding by the Queensland Government through Health and Wellbeing Queensland from 30 June 2022. It is an excellent example of a successful strategy that can prevent and mitigate social isolation.
- Heart Foundation Walking supports older and more vulnerable people, as well as people recovering from a heart attack or stroke, to remain physically active and stay socially connected. It is a preventive health program as well as an important adjunct to cardiac rehabilitation programs.
- Heart Foundation Walking supports people by providing both face to face free walking groups throughout Queensland, as well as free online Personal Walking Plans. We have more than 10,800 people walking together in Heart Foundation Walking groups and over 19,600 Queenslanders have signed up for online Personal Walking Plans.
- Heart Foundation Walking is particularly popular with older people with 66% aged over 60. Over 80% of participants are women, drawn to the safe, social environment of groups.
- Walking is an accessible and culturally accepted form of physical activity within First Nations communities. The Heart Foundation has partnered with the Torres Strait Islander Regional Council to establish Heart Foundation Walking groups on the remote outer islands of the Torres Strait. The Heart Foundation encourages walking group participation within First Nation communities, both urban and regional, through marketing materials and merchandise designed by First Nations people specifically to appeal to this audience.

Heart Foundation walking materials designed by and for First Nations people:



Heart Foundation Walking online Facebook community supports lived experience:

Heart Foundation Walking supports participants through a Facebook online community, illustrating the impact via lived experience through members.



“People join walking groups for physical activity, but they stay in them for social reasons”¹²

- A meta-analysis that looked at the health benefits of walking groups in particular, referred to walking groups as a sociable activity, capable of connecting communities and reducing isolation.¹⁴
- Recent Heart Foundation Walking survey results echoed the same beliefs, finding that individuals who participated in Heart Foundation Walking reported a positive impact on mental health and acquired social benefits including reduced levels of perceived isolation and loneliness.

Recommendation 3:

The Heart Foundation strongly recommends that the Queensland Government reinvests in the Heart Foundation Walking program from 30 June 2022 to support vulnerable groups; in particular older people and First Nations people.

- **Heart Foundation psychological and social health action plan** is another resource, available online for people who have had a heart attack to assist them to make changes to improve their health - <https://www.heartfoundation.org.au/Heart-health-education/action-plans/psychological-and-social-health-action-plan>

Role, scope, and priorities of a state-wide strategy

The proposed Social Isolation and Loneliness Strategy will assist a whole of government and community response to the challenge of social isolation and loneliness to our community.

This Strategy will need to be designed to interact with and support existing strategies; including but not limited to the Queensland Walking Strategy, Queensland Cycling Strategy, Activate! Queensland Strategy for physical activity and movement, the Queensland Housing Strategy and Rural and Remote Health and Wellbeing Strategy to reduce inequity.

The Queensland Government's *Healthy Places, Healthy People*⁹ initiative will be important to ensure that it is translated into action so that built environment infrastructure projects that preference health considerations are prioritised.

Synergy with national strategies will also be important, including the National Preventive Health Strategy, National Obesity Strategy and so on. It will be important to ensure across government collaboration in multiple departments as well as collaboration with industry and NGOs.

Recommendation 4:

- 1. The Heart Foundation strongly supports the development of a state-wide Social Isolation and Loneliness Strategy to strengthen a whole of government and community response.**

For further information, to discuss this submission or request a witness to the inquiry, please contact Alison Durham and/or Rebecca Lowe, Advocacy Managers QLD.

Yours sincerely



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