

13 August 2021

Committee Secretary  
Community Support and Services Committee  
Parliament House George Street  
Brisbane Qld 4000

Dear Secretary,

### **Introduction**

As of late 2020, there were over 500,000 lots in more than 50,000 community title schemes across Queensland. SCA (Qld) is the peak association supporting Queensland's strata sector, with more than 1,200 individual and corporate members who help oversee, advise and manage assets worth tens of billions of dollars. As the peak body for the strata industry, SCA (Qld) is in the unique position to understand the sector from all angles.

SCA (Qld) is in an enviable position to understand the sector from a broad array of viewpoints owing to its diverse membership. SCA (Qld) represents strata managers, community titles schemes with committee members acting as nominees, lot owners as individuals and service providers to the strata industry including specialist insurers, painting suppliers, energy suppliers, solicitors, accountants, water and plumbing providers, banks, elevator maintenance professionals, cleaning providers, surveyors, valuers, glaziers, IT providers and pool servicing and maintenance providers.

Loneliness is a blight that diminishes economic, health and social outcomes for both individuals and society more broadly. Chronic loneliness has a health impact akin to smoking 15 cigarettes a day<sup>1</sup>.

The built environment is of obvious interest to our members. The management, servicing and maintenance of assets within the built environment is of course core business. The interaction between social isolation, loneliness and the built environment is well documented and there is a consensus that city design features and planning contribute to feelings of social isolation and or social connection<sup>2</sup>. According to research on the topic<sup>1</sup> whilst the built environment does not cause social interaction, it can serve to enable or limit potential interaction between individuals, particularly in shared or public space.

City planning policy has typically previously been focused on material needs, pragmatically speaking, these are obviously easier to measure than social or psychological well-being. Employment rates, commute times, pollution and housing affordability all are numbers on a page which can be measured simply. Social connectedness and emotional well-being are difficult to measure to begin with, let alone when trying to isolate the impact of the various factors that contribute.

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<sup>1</sup> Shafique, T., 2018. *Designing cities to counter loneliness? Let's explore the possibilities*. [online] The Conversation. Available at: <<https://theconversation.com/designing-cities-to-counter-loneliness-lets-explore-the-possibilities-104853>> [Accessed 21 July 2021].

<sup>2</sup> Jane-Frances, K., 2012. *Social Cities*. *The Grattan Institute*, [online] Available at: <[https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/137\\_report\\_social\\_cities\\_web.pdf](https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/137_report_social_cities_web.pdf)> [Accessed 20 July 2021].



The studies which have been done into the effect of the built environment on social isolation and psychological well-being indicate that city planning and architecture can both help and hinder social connection<sup>1</sup>.

### **Green Space**

Strata law is in substance a framework to ensure the preservation of property rights in conjunction with the harmonious functioning of high density housing communities. Green space is broadly taken to mean things like parks and vegetation cover. A city or town with more strata dwellings will be able to accommodate more green space with the same population than one of the same area and population size which is made up of more detached housing.

The University of New South Wales has recently published a study which found that there was a strong correlation between green space levels and a reduction in loneliness. The study found that adults who are resident in neighbourhoods with 30% or greater green space had vastly lower odds of being lonely than their peers living in areas where there is 10% or less green space. This effect was even more pronounced when individuals were living alone-with the odds of feelings of loneliness in these people being halved when living in a high green space area<sup>3</sup>.

By putting more residents in a smaller share of the urban footprint, more of an area can be preserved to serve the goal of ensuring there is more “green space” in a region. Southeast Queensland’s (which is home to a large majority of our states population) development future is constrained to the urban footprint outlined in ShapingSEQ<sup>4</sup>. Pleasingly, the two largest city councils within this region (Gold Coast and Brisbane) have green space targets in excess of 40%.<sup>5</sup> These targets cannot be achieved without a sensible, pro strata development policy to inform all tiers of government. Green space can only remain as the population grows if intelligently designed strata property makes up the bulk of new housing stock.

By ensuring that there is appropriate green space for residents within Southeast Queensland and of course the rest of the state as part of state planning policy, the government can clearly make a long term impact in the reduction of loneliness. Putting this in as a key consideration of planning policy may play a significant role in the longer term mitigation of loneliness, particularly as the population ages and single person households become increasingly common. We acknowledge strata in and of itself does not create more green space, but rather it encourages and gives opportunity to councils and private individuals to preserve and curate space as such.

### **Home Ownership**

In the final quarter of 2020, the disparity between the price of detached houses in Brisbane and strata properties (townhouses, units, etc) was approximately \$300,000.000<sup>6</sup>. This means, by default, that strata properties help allow a broader demographic of Queenslanders to own their own home.

<sup>3</sup> Astell-Burt, T. and Feng, X., 2021. *People's odds of loneliness could fall by up to half if cities hit 30% green space targets*. [online] UNSW Newsroom. Available at: <<https://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/social-affairs/peoples-odds-loneliness-could-fall-half-if-cities-hit-30-green-space-targets>> [Accessed 20 July 2021].

<sup>4</sup> Department of Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning, 2017. *ShapingSEQ*. South East Queensland Regional Plan 2017, p.101.

<sup>5</sup> City of Gold Coast, 2021. *Our Natural City Strategy*. Gold Coast: City of Gold Coast. Brisbane.qld.gov.au, 2021. *Our clean, green and sustainable city*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/about-council/governance-and-strategy/vision-and-strategy/brisbane-vision/our-clean-green-city>> [Accessed 28 July 2021].

<sup>6</sup> Tilley, E., 2021. Brisbane house price hits new record high in middle of COVID-19. *The Courier Mail*.



Whilst home ownership at face value may do little to mitigate feelings of loneliness, there is demonstrated evidence that owning a home delivers emotional and social benefits beyond improving an individual's balance sheet. Home ownership is demonstrated by research to have meaningful positive effects on feelings of inclusion and community<sup>7</sup>.

Homeowners have stronger social networks, are more likely to see friends and relatives and are more likely to be active members of clubs and associations<sup>8</sup>. All of these activities help ameliorate loneliness, build social connection and cohesion and ensure that people have positive human interactions. These benefits are believed to come through feelings of greater stability and security which is associated with home ownership.

As discussed above, government has placed restrictions on the release of land where the majority of the population of Queensland currently lives (SEQ). Strata allows denser dwelling construction. Without expanding the number of strata schemes approved (perhaps even in excess of present targets), there is little doubt that home ownership may be financially out of reach for an increasing number of Queenslanders, particularly in the Southeast. If this occurs, feelings of isolation and lower social engagement (in the forms outlined above) are likely to increase based on the available data. This is antithetical to the goals of this inquiry, and thus we strongly advise the committee to place housing policy, particularly affordability, at the heart of their suggested whole of government response in this regard. Strata can play a large role in ensuring equitable and widespread access to the promise of home ownership.

### **Transport and Commuting**

Strata title properties allow for higher density of population closer to services, jobs and recreational facilities. Despite moves to remote working, Central Business Districts ("CBD's") remain a key feature of our cities, a social and economic hub. Employment opportunities are still more numerous near CBD's. Obviously, land is at a premium the closer it is to the CBD, and inner city suburbs are more densely packed than outer suburban areas. If the population continues to grow and there are not more strata schemes constructed near these job rich areas, commutes to work and social activities will increase.

Commuter suburbs springing up on the outskirts of major cities to accommodate growth because of a failure to increase density (strata schemes) will inevitably lead to longer travel times, higher stress levels and further social isolation. Commuting overwhelmingly has negative effects on mental wellbeing, social isolation and loneliness.

Harvard Political Scientist Robert Putnam, who's year 2000 book "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community" is considered a seminal work on the declining social capital in America has noted "[he] was shocked to find how robust a predictor of social isolation is... a simple rule of thumb: Every ten minutes of commuting results in ten percent fewer social connections. Commuting is connected to social isolation, which causes unhappiness<sup>9</sup>." With the population of Queensland poised to boom<sup>10</sup>, without strata, commutes to jobs, facilities and amenities could explode and a resultant boom in social isolation can quickly be expected to follow. This is unacceptable from a social and economic standpoint.

<sup>7</sup> Stillman, S. and Liang, Y., 2010. Does Homeownership Improve Personal Wellbeing?.

<sup>8</sup> Dockery, A. and Bawa, S., 2019. Why Do Home-Owners do Better?. *State of Australian Cities Conference and PhD Symposium*.

<sup>9</sup> Paumgarten, N., 2007. There and Back Again The soul of the commuter. *The New Yorker*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/04/16/there-and-back-again>> [Accessed 22 July 2021].

<sup>10</sup> Department of Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning, 2017. *ShapingSEQ*. South East Queensland Regional Plan 2017

If the government is to ameliorate loneliness and social isolation in the long term then appropriate planning must be a core priority, with specific reference to ensuring low commute times to work and essential services as an important measure to ameliorate loneliness. This is an intelligent measure both economically and socially. This can all not be achieved without a deliberate policy to sensibly and strategically grow the strata sector.

### **Governance Models and Shared Facilities**

Member feedback on these matters tended to focus on the governance model promoted by body corporate legislation and how it encourages cooperation, volunteering and hopefully a sense of unity. The shared decision making process and participatory fashion in which schemes are run means that many owners feel their lot makes them part of their community. There is a sense in many well run schemes the shared governance model encourages community and collaboration for the betterment of the collective. This by default forces some social interaction out of people who may otherwise feel isolated.

Shared facilities also provide opportunities for interaction that may otherwise not occur, particularly for individuals who may be isolated. Strata gyms, tennis courts, pools and other recreational facilities provide opportunities for interaction within a very close vicinity, particularly for those unable to drive or with limited access to public transport.

The spontaneous opportunities to engage in shared facilities in many bodies corporate can often lead to interactions that would not occur in a comparable community of detached or terrace housing. Bodies corporate tend to foster a sense of community amongst residents. Communal ownership of the common areas encourages a shared investment in the overall well-being of the scheme, both physical and its residents. All of these factors help minimize social isolation and loneliness.

### **Problems with Covid-19 Pandemic and Solutions**

Throughout the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, more and more people have spent increasing amounts of time at home, alone and socially isolated. Feedback from members notes that problems that may have been ignored or minor disagreements within a scheme have often times been exacerbated or become of greater significance, leading to disharmony and rancour.

Despite this “push” factor in regard to body corporate disputes, there has been little to nil substantive action in improving the dispute resolution processes available to the sector. Body corporate disputes can cause significant stress, and unlike workplace disputes or similar, they do not give a party respite in the place where they should feel their safest, their home. This can lead to a horrible cycle of emotional distress for people, particularly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic where loneliness has been caused by a lack of outside options for socialization.

In Queensland, the Office of the Commissioner for Body Corporate and Community Management (**Commissioner's Office**) is the government agency tasked with providing information and dispute resolution services to sector stakeholders. Its functions are provided for under Chapter 6 of the *Body Corporate and Community Management Act 1997*. At present the lengthy delays in the adjudication process or dispute resolution would indicate that the Commissioner's Office is under resourced.. Extending the unpleasantness of a dispute beyond what is necessary leads to stress and anxiety for participants, regardless of right and wrong in the matter. A stressed and anxious individual is far more likely to feel isolated and apprehensive about engaging with people.

The efficient running of the Commissioner's Office, including appropriate staffing levels and resourcing, is critical to the overarching efficiency and amenity of the sector. The Commissioner's Office is a world leading resource and is critical to the ongoing growth and livability of the sector. Schemes are slated to grow in number and therefore there will be more Queenslanders living in strata. To this end, we



believe that an important measure needed to ensure loneliness and social isolation are not exacerbated by stress in a scheme is for the Commissioner's Office to have appropriate resourcing.

### **Conclusion**

Strata will play an important role in determining the social and urban landscape of Queensland into the future. It is therefore critical that the sector is respected and seen as being a tool to help build a more socially connected and economically prosperous state. For the reasons stated above, strata must inform housing policy to help ameliorate social isolation and loneliness for all Queenslanders.

Sincerely



Peter Crogan  
Executive Officer