

Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation

Submission prepared by:

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Background

The Somerset region has an area of 5382 sq km and includes five major townships; Esk, Fernvale, Kilcoy, Lowood and Toogoolawah and numerous smaller villages. There has been limited growth in the northern areas with most growth occurring in the southern area where new subdivisions are being developed in response to the expansion of the Ipswich metropolitan area. The region was home to approximately 25,000 people at the 2016 census and is expected to grow to an estimated 34,500 by 2031.

At the 2016 census, the population's median age was 43 years, compared to 37 years for Queensland, with 26.1% being 60 years or over compared to 20.7% for the state. This is much higher for some towns such as Esk and Toogoolawah where around 40% of the population is 60 years or older. Only 35.7% of residents had a Certificate III or higher compared to 45.2% of Queensland and the median weekly income per person was \$512 compared with \$660 for the state. In short, our area is older, less educated and has less disposable income than the Queensland average.

The Department of Communities Housing and Digital Economy fund the Somerset Region Support Service through Service Agreement CDSS22255.2 for \$135,920 per annum. This supports one officer who assists residents throughout the region with projects, events and resources, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable. The position is mobile. There are no place based neighbourhood centres within this local government area. Over the last twelve months the service has helped 760 feel more connected through activities, events and regular group meetings.

Social Isolation and Loneliness

Social isolation is present within a number of cohorts and can be related to a lack of opportunity to socialise or other inhibiting factors. Over a period of time, isolation can lead to loneliness, which can have major impacts on a person's health, mental health, confidence and capacity to lead fulfilling lives. This can ultimately lead to hospitalisation or in certain cases premature death. This is well documented and doesn't need to be explored further in this document.

Seniors

More seniors are moving to Somerset each year; some being in their seventies when they arrive. Many of these new residents do not have any family or friends in the region. When

asked what instigated the move, the replies always relate to one or two factors. They are either downsizing (reaping economic benefit) and/or looking for somewhere relatively close to the metropolitan area, where they feel safe. This is possibly due to lower reports of crime or antisocial behaviour and the perception of a country life being healthier and less stressful.

For some, integration is easy, joining local groups and establishing a network of friends, but for others, isolation becomes the norm, due to a growing lack of confidence and inability to fit into the range of activities on offer. This is particularly so for those who already suffer from social anxiety or health issues. They find it hard to break into a new group, when members have known each other for years and they don't understand or appreciate the dynamics of the group.

This lack of integration can become life changing, as many cannot afford to move back to the metropolitan areas, with real estate prices escalating disproportionately. This is apparent when one partner passes away and the remaining resident has not any established a friendship group. These residents become extremely isolated and lonely and lose the capacity to adapt. This is particularly so, where the remaining partner is unable to drive or has chronic medical conditions.

Although much more resilient than new residents, failing health or reduced mobility of even longer term residents can restrict capacity to remain involved. People who have been active members in their community, often find it challenging to participate and ask for help as they decline. This is particularly apparent for those whose family has moved from the region. This year, one of our townships experienced a suicide, where an elderly resident decided to take his life due to loneliness, after his wife passed away.

Recently a medical practitioner in Fernvale described the loneliness of many older people in that community. The GP has been so moved by the phenomena, that he spends extra time with his elderly patients, as they are in need of contact. This supports conversations had with interstate relatives of older Fernvale residents, who describe a scenario of their relatives not connecting with anyone or any service since relocating to the region.

Lack of "tech savvy" ability, also plays a part in isolating seniors, as many have not been able to embrace technology. This could be as a result of poor literacy, poor computer literacy, living in an area with poor internet connectivity or inadequate disposable income to afford technology. This can isolate them from remote families, but also from information which would be otherwise available. We often hear, "I didn't know about that", even though it had been advertised in the free newspapers, on noticeboards and via various Facebook pages.

Lack of transport, either public, community or private, can often be a significant barrier resulting in isolation. Public transport is limited and timetabled for workers, with very early morning routes and evening returns. Community transport is in high demand and there are limited organisations servicing the area. Often Commonwealth Home Support Package funding has been exhausted in our region, in the first half of the year. Furthermore, with the distances being travelled to access services, even funding provided through home care packages is inadequate and is being exhausted with medical trips, rather than for attendance at social outings. In other areas, there are funding black spots with no services being available to support seniors with "in home" support and transport. In response to inadequate transport, a Toogoolawah business commenced a booked hire service. However, this venture failed, as most seniors could not afford the fee, which at \$1 per kilometre, was cheaper than most services, but distances and wait times made it unaffordable.

Youth

Mental health amongst young people has been an issue in parts of Somerset for some years. The area around Lowood and Fernvale had the fifth highest youth suicide rate in Australia, which prompted a collaborative partnership between Council and the Darling Downs West Moreton Primary Health Network and the West Moreton Hospital and Health Service. In a survey, which heard the voices of 46% of young people in that region, lack of employment opportunity followed by inadequate transport were raised as significant issues. Although employment is not directly related to social isolation and loneliness, the lack of opportunity, being unable to obtain worthwhile employment within the area, continues to keep some of these young people isolated. They have limited opportunities to improve their current situation and life outcomes. They are left to languish at home or in some cases opt for poor life choices. Lack of transport intersects with this, as without transport they have the challenge of accessing work further afield.

Transport is also a challenge from a social perspective. School students, reliant upon school bus transport, often find themselves isolated once they reach home. This leads them to rely upon social media for ongoing connections, outside of the school arena. The above survey also indicated that 77% indicated that bullying was an issue, with much of this being played out on social media.

Since the easing of the initial pandemic restrictions, young people have failed to return to some social events. The Toogoolawah Pictures, which used to attract local young people on Saturday nights, has not seen them return in pre-pandemic numbers. These young people are mainly reliant upon their parents for transport. It is unclear why parents are now not encouraging this activity. COVID may have forced people to redirect their money or they can no longer afford the cost, having lost income. They may have found alternatives such as Netflix. In either case this lack of social interaction is leading to isolation and reliance on social media. Schools and service providers report social anxiety due to online gaming and social media. Some are now withdrawing from school, possibly, as a consequence.

Young Families

Libraries in our region offer a range of regular activities for young children, but in certain areas uptake is poor. Participation is still much lower than pre-COVID. The Best Start Somerset Group, a group of service providers who operate in the "Early Years" space in southern Somerset, have identified transport issues (including one car families), financial constraints, knowledge of what is available and how to connect, as well as life priorities due to complex needs, being inhibiting factors for social engagement. These all contribute to the risk of isolation and loss of support networks. One comment; "Often young families are struggling to meet daily requirements and basic needs, attending activities is beyond them."

This is exacerbated where drugs and alcohol abuse, domestic and family violence or mental health interface with unemployment and/or financial distress.

Persons with a disability

For those who have been able to access NDIS, isolation has been reduced, as there are multiple accredited NDIS services available in the region. However, there are many people in Somerset who live with a disability, who have not yet accessed the scheme or who are not eligible for various reasons. There are difficulties for those with a physical disability, as many shops and facilities are older buildings, which do not meet the current disability access requirements. This can make it challenging for some people to participate in regular aspects of community life, resulting in withdrawal and isolation.

Some Farmers

Somerset has been drought declared since March 2017. Since 2000, the region has been drought declared on two other occasions, spanning an additional five years. This regular pattern of drought, combined with floods, bushfires and COVID has added to the financial and social burden on farmers. During the recent drought, the cost of purchasing supplementary fodder and the time taken to hand feed animals has reduced many farmers' capacity to participate in social activities. The impact of this has been exacerbated by the pandemic. This has increased social isolation. Destocking may limit the ability to rebuild herd numbers. Financial strain impacts on their capacity to engage with other activities increasing the risk of isolation and loneliness.

<h3>What has been undertaken</h3>
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Council Activities

Various activities/projects/events have been held to improve social inclusion with some hitting the mark and others not so successful. As indicated previously, lack of knowledge about activities and being able to get there, are often barriers to participation.

Somerset Region Support Service has held various community events over many years, which have been excellent ways of connecting people to services and groups. However, whether part of this service and others offered by Council (Youth, Sports and Recreation, Libraries), there are only a limited number of activities offered on a weekly/regular basis, where friendships can be established. Regular activities are highlighted in bold in the list below.

Seniors

- Annual Seniors Week/Month activities which usually include a free event and expo at Esk. Last year due to COVID, four mini concerts in various parks were held instead.
- Ballroom dance lessons, **light aerobic exercises, aqua aerobics**.
- **Women's Groups**, craft groups and activities
- Creation of resource kits for distribution by police when making welfare checks
- Formal tech savvy lessons at libraries, as well as informal assistance
- Cuppa and Chats with guest speakers

Youth

- Youth camps, including emerging elders' camps
- Youth Week activities
- School holiday programs
- School Support Services Expos/Wellness Day
- Lowood Young Person's Wellbeing Expo with entertainment
- Youth resource cards

Families with young children

- Teddy Bears Picnic and Mad Hatter's Tea Party including free activities and opportunities to meet support services in a soft entry manner.
- **Storytime, Baby Bounce, Lego Club**, craft and other activities at libraries

Farmers

- Farmers Information days and workshops in association with rural support services
- Farmers Dinners and social days out
- Information packs provided at these events

Community Group Activities

Within various communities, there are social clubs and activities available. Those supporting the older cohort, for example Men's Sheds, craft groups and Over 50's/Senior Citizens are the most vibrant. However, with the exception of the Men's Sheds, other groups often struggle to attract new membership and committee members are aging, creating challenges for the future. Council provides an online community calendar where known activities, including contact details are listed. This is available online and can be printed in hard copy if requested, to assist in raising awareness amongst newcomers.

Council Infrastructure

Council libraries provide safe places for people to get out of their homes and into the community. They are one of the few spaces where people can linger all day and not get questioned. Quoting one staff member; "We tend to attract quite a few lost souls who possibly don't interact with anyone else during their day." However, our libraries are only open during business hours, not on the weekends and staff do not have much free time to interact.

This year Council has created community wellness hubs in Kilcoy and Esk. These hubs are aimed at providing suitable spaces for visiting services, to encourage outreach and reduce the need for residents to travel into Ipswich and Caboolture. They are only occupied by the services, when the services are scheduled, as Council does not have the capacity to have onsite staff. Although amply suitable for outreach service provision, they do not replace purpose-built neighbourhood centres, which have the capacity to form the social heart of a community, with their welcoming, inclusive and vibrant multipurpose spaces and functions, thus helping to alleviate isolation and loneliness.

Conclusion

Rural and regional communities can be great places for people to make friends. They are well known for their laid back and friendly attitude. However, it is not always easy for newcomers to feel "at home" and integrate. This is particularly true where ill health, poor mental health, financial distress or diverse backgrounds are also present. These factors interface with the challenges of limited transport options and an absence of recognised place-based service provision. This increases loneliness and isolation in a region, which although close to the metropolitan area, does not have the same infrastructure to support social inclusion.

Approved by Somerset Regional Council on 11 August 2021.


Signed


 Andrew Johnson, Chief Executive Officer, Somerset Regional Council

Date

16/8/21

Signed


 Mayor Graeme Lehmann, Somerset Regional Council

Date

16/8/2021