

# Social Isolation & Loneliness in Queensland

**Inquiry Submission prepared by:**

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On behalf of

Gympie Community Place

18 Excelsior Road, Gympie, Qld, 4570

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## Introduction - Gympie Community Place

Gympie Community Place has been operating as a community neighbourhood centre in the Gympie Region for over 35 years. On a daily basis we come into contact with people experiencing vulnerabilities including social isolation and loneliness. As an organisation with an open-door, universal access approach, this gives us a unique perspective on issues of social isolation and loneliness in our region.

### Our Region

The Gympie Region LGA is an inner regional area (ARIA) covering 6,884 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of just under 53,000 and based on the city of Gympie<sup>1</sup>.

According to the SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD), where low index values represent areas of most disadvantage, we have zero percent of our population in the least disadvantaged quintile 5 (Qld 20%) and only 2.2% in quintile 4 (Qld 20%) while 46.1% of people are in quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) and a further 36.2% in quintile 2. This means that 82.3% of our population are in the lowest two quintiles (most disadvantaged areas).

The Gympie region has higher than average rates of unemployment (Gympie 10.5%; Qld 7.3%), lower than average median personal income (Gympie \$24,908; Qld \$34,320) and higher than average reliance on a range of welfare payments (age pension, carer allowance, disability pension, family tax benefit A and Jobseeker allowance).

In terms of households, 27.2% of our households in our region are lone persons (Qld 23.5%). Around 8% of our population need assistance with a profound or severe disability (Qld 5.2%). Our rate of homelessness is estimated at 58 per 10,000 people (Qld 45.6).

While located for statistical purposes in the Wide Bay Burnett Region, the Gympie LGA is often aligned with the Sunshine Coast Region for administrative purposes (e.g. Health services). We find this mismatch can often result in issues around access to services, both government and non-government, for many of our residents.

We provide this data because factors affecting relative socio-economic disadvantage, such as unemployment and reliance on social welfare are also known risk factors which impact on social isolation and loneliness.

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<sup>1</sup> All data in this section drawn from Queensland Government Statistician's Office, Queensland Treasury, Queensland Regional Profiles: Resident Profile for Gympie (R) Local Government Area, 10 August 2021.

## Our Service

At Gympie Community Place we understand that social isolation and loneliness are related but not identical concepts. We also understand that there are multiple risk factors some of which we see as systemic, hence the data above, and some personal which we address below.

As a community centre we have universal access for our whole community.

We see our role as to connect people with what they need. We do this through providing vital information and supporting access to the services and supports that people need.

We connect with people to provide opportunities to reduce social isolation and loneliness.

We are, far too often, the safety net that catches the most vulnerable people. Increasingly, we are coming into contact with people who fall through the cracks and holes of other service providers. This is most often because they do not meet the strict criteria of services who provide support. We do not have any criteria for providing support. If it is needed, we will do what we can.

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**In this submission we would like to address TORS 2,3,4, & 5. We are addressing this from our perspective, our lived experience, on the ground, within our local community.**

**This is what we see.**

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## TOR 2 – The Causes & Drivers of Social Isolation & Loneliness

What we see in our local community that contributes significantly to social isolation & loneliness:

- **Disconnection** – we regularly see people who identify as being alone in this world, with no family or friends, no social connections, and no support networks in their life. Relationships that existed previously have broken down or ended for a variety of reasons.
- **Poverty** – we see people who lack the financial resources to meet their basic needs. Often caused by the inadequacy of the welfare system to meet the basic cost of living, people cannot pay their rent, they cannot afford basic medications and they struggle to afford to eat. This severely limits their ability to connect with others.
- **The technology divide** – we see many people who are unable to use technology for a variety of reasons. They find it increasingly difficult to access services as many now require the use of technology and online tools for access.
- **Complex vulnerabilities** – we see many people with complex, multi-faceted issues that are truly overwhelming and challenging. These issues can go on for many years. And this can cause isolation as the interest or engagement of others will often reduce over time.
- **Discrimination** – we regularly see people facing various forms of discrimination who are seen as different, not “normal” or unwell. People are often judged by others, and unfortunately this can include some service providers.
- **Loss of personal contact** – with the growth in the use of technology and devices, and further exacerbated by COVID restrictions, in-person, social connections and interactions are significantly reduced for everyone. The opportunities to connect with real people, in real time have been steadily disappearing.
- **Geographical location** – we see people who live in the outer areas of the region where the absence of public transport and the cost of maintaining private vehicles can be a significant barrier for connection, especially when the opportunity to connect requires time, means and money.



## TOR 3 – The Protective Factors Known to Mitigate Social Isolation and Loneliness

At Gympie Community Place our motto is: Community happens when people are connected. This is at the heart of our work. And we know that connecting people with others who care and who can help has a positive impact on social isolation and loneliness.

At the community centre we find that a “wrap around” approach makes a significant difference for people, especially in their mindset or their attitude to their situation.

We will ‘wrap around’ a vulnerable person by providing:

- a primary service worker, who will provide the initial support and establish a connection with the individual
- an assessment of needs and a plan of action to address those needs
- supported linkages and “warm” referrals to ensure positive and supportive connections with other services and supports
- some financial support to reduce financial stress and ensure essential basic needs are prioritised.

In addition to this we provide:

- opportunities and encouragement to increase social connection by participation in social activities, both ours and those available elsewhere in the community
- opportunities to participate with others in the community, in learning or volunteering.

The feedback we receive is that people say they feel less alone and more able to cope. They feel less out of control, less overwhelmed and less hopeless. And they feel like someone actually cares.

## TOR 4 – The Benefits of Addressing Social Isolation & Loneliness

By intentionally addressing social isolation and loneliness we can make significant changes in the lives of people. Addressing social isolation and loneliness for individuals provides general improvements to their general health and wellbeing and it reduces mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety. It can reduce the risk of suicide.

We are always looking for ways to increase social opportunities for people in our community. We host regular activities, things such as computer classes, craft groups, social gatherings, community events and morning teas. We will gather some feedback from participants when we can, but we do not ask specific questions about loneliness and social isolation. What we know about social isolation and loneliness in our community comes in the form of ‘anecdotal’ – these are the things that people tell us. We regularly hear the very personal stories of people's lives. And we regularly hear that they are or that they feel very alone or isolated.

When we are able to get lonely or isolated people to engage with us in some way, we are overwhelmingly told what a difference it has made to them. They will express how positive it is to be heard and listened to, to have someone take the time to care and to connect with them.

We acknowledge that collecting data around loneliness and isolation and measuring the effectiveness of strategies to reduce social isolation and loneliness, will be a challenge. We would encourage caution and care, so that any proposed measurement techniques do not cause any harm to those vulnerable persons whom we are trying to support.



## TOR 5 – How Current Investment Can Be Leveraged

### Current State

Gympie Community Place is a Queensland Government funded community centre. In recent years we were fortunate to receive considerable infrastructure investment from the State Government and in 2013 we were provided with use of a purpose-built community centre facility. This facility has enabled us to grow our services and connect with more people.

- In 2012/2013 financial year, in our old premises, we had 6,200 people attend our centre and we provided information support to 2,800 people.
- In 2018/2019 financial year (last normal pre-COVID period), in our new centre, we had 17,000 people come through the centre and we provided information support to 6,200 people.

With a population of just under 53,000, this is a significant connection with people within our local community.

This growth is incredibly positive, and it has allowed us to engage with more members of our community, but it has also placed significant pressure on the organisation and its staff. Our centre receives core funding of just \$115,375 per year which is based on the traditional single worker model of many community centres.

The complexity, the volume, and the scope of the work that this one worker is expected to undertake has risen dramatically over recent years, with no additional commensurate increase in funding and no additional resources to support this growth. Now we simply have no more capacity for expansion within our current funding allocation.

### Perfectly Placed

Gympie Community Place, like all community and neighbourhood centres, is already dealing with people experiencing social isolation and loneliness within our community. We do this every day. And we do it because we care about this issue and because we want people in our community to know that they are not alone.

- ✓ We are ideally placed, on the ground in our community with a vested interest
- ✓ We are well established and well known in our community
- ✓ We are experienced with localised knowledge of the needs and the support systems, specific to our community
- ✓ We are already proven to be highly effective and extremely efficient in providing quality, flexible, strengths-based service delivery
- ✓ We reside in a facility that was purpose built to support community use

You already have investment, infrastructure, and resources within all of your community and neighbourhood centres across Queensland. We just need some more resources to enable us to increase our capacity and focus into this space. We can help you make a difference here if you help to resource us to do so.

### How Can We Help?

We are already doing what we can within our current capacity. But with more resources we could do a lot more to reduce isolation and loneliness within our community. Double our base funding and you would significantly increase our capacity.

With such funding Gympie Community Place would seek to engage a specialist worker who can:

- ✓ support citizen led, place-based solutions to address social isolation and loneliness
- ✓ increase broader community engagement and community development opportunities
- ✓ develop and actively facilitate more social activities and events that connect people
- ✓ travel and connect with people in the more isolated parts of our regional community
- ✓ support existing community centre staff and programs, providing additional opportunities for targeted support for vulnerable and disadvantaged persons
- ✓ gather localised data on loneliness and social isolation, within our community

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Vikki Cousins (Coordinator)

Signed: *V Cousins* .

Date: Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> August 2021