



18 August 2021

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

Sent via email: CSSC@parliament.qld.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary (Community Support and Services Committee)

Re: Submission on the nature and extent of the impact of social isolation and loneliness in Queensland

The Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) is the national body representing the planning profession, and planning more broadly, championing the role of planning in shaping Australia's future. PIA facilitates this through strong leadership, advocacy and contemporary planning education.

The Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) commends the Queensland Parliament for initiating the Community Support and Services Committee Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness which is charged with exploring social isolation and loneliness on six broad terms.

PIA accepts the evidence that social isolation and loneliness impact health outcomes, quality of life and mortality.¹ Due to the association between social isolation, built form and design of our communities, we felt it important to provide a submission addressing terms five and six (see box 1, emphasis added)

5. how current investment by the Queensland Government, other levels of government, the non-government, corporate and other sectors may be leveraged **to prevent, mitigate and address the drivers and impacts of social isolation and loneliness** across Queensland, including:
 - a. services and programs such as health and mental health, transport, housing, education, employment and training, sport and recreation, community services and facilities, digital inclusion, volunteering, the arts and culture, community development, **and planning for accessible, inclusive and connected communities**
6. the **role, scope and priorities of a state-wide strategy** to address social isolation and loneliness, considering interactions with existing Queensland and national strategies.

Box 1: Committee terms extract

¹ Holt-Lunstad, J. et al. (2015) Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review. Perspectives of Psychological Science. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1745691614568352>

This submission promotes protective strategies for social isolation including personal and cultural safety; building social capital; accessible transport and reliable digital connectivity; secure and well-designed housing; and vibrant neighbourhoods and towns outlined in themes below.

Theme 1: Personal and Cultural Safety

Personal and cultural safety support freedom of movement and maximise civic participation and the use of public space and places. Safety for women and girls, people with disability and people of colour are particularly important. The design of movement paths and transport stops to maximise safety underpins mobility. Women and girls perceive some of these places as unsafe and they modify their behaviour and travel less as a result.²

Features of the built environment that reflect cultural differences and celebrate First Nations and other cultures are important to create welcoming and safe places and build cultural understanding.³ Cultural expression in signage, language, public art and design in public places plays an important role in signifying our communities as inclusive and welcoming. PIA has a current policy focus on building capacity in the profession for planning inclusive of First Nations.

Theme 2: Building Social Capital

Strategies that build social capital are central to addressing social isolation. Social capital bonds individuals to each other and connects us to people who are not like us. People who feel a connection (no matter how temporary) feel happier and more connected to others.⁴

Social capital exists in the close network of family and friends who generally live nearby. Many of the ABC Australia Talks survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they did not know their neighbours by name. Nearly 40% of inner urban respondents did not know neighbours by name, compared to 23% in rural areas.⁵ Social capital is key to strong social fabric and there are built environment and community development strategies to build that capital. Elements in the built environment that build social capital include:

- free or low-cost community facilities that offer general and targeted programs for community members;
- public spaces and local parks located near homes as sites of cultural expression and cultural solidarity.⁶

² CrowdSpot (2021) YourGround (crowd-mapping website of women, girls and gender-diverse peoples experience of public recreation spaces, Victoria). CrowdSpot with XYX Lab, Monash University. Accessed at yourground.crowdspot.com.au August 2021

³ Amin, A. (2008). Collective Culture and Urban Public Space. *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy and action* 12, 1: 5-24.

⁴ Tasker, M. (2019). Beyond Befriending: Cross-sectoral approaches to tackling social isolation. Local Government Information Unit: accessed at www.lgiu.org August 2021.

⁵ ABC Australia Talks 2021: accessed at [Australia Talks - Find out where you fit and how you compare to other Australians in 2021 - ABC](#), August 2021.

⁶ Gobster, P. (2002). Managing Urban Parks for a Racially Ethnically Diverse Clientele. *Leisure Sciences: and Interdisciplinary Journal*. Vol.24 (2).143-159.

- Infrastructure in the parks that enable ways to build social capital in those spaces
- Accessible green spaces and natural areas to support the chance meeting of strangers
- Sports and recreation infrastructure to bring people together in organised activity
- Halls and meeting places (outdoor and indoor) to underpin group activity
- Public facilities like libraries to welcome and connect groups
- Community gardens or places where people can share common interest.⁷

Placemaking approaches, and neighbourhood planning can engage with local stakeholders and communities to create new and refresh existing places to ensure they meet contemporary social, cultural and economic conditions⁸. Across Queensland, the state's network of community neighbourhood centres provides the expertise and resources to design, fund and deliver a range of activities which connect and engage vulnerable households and communities and reduce social isolation⁹.

Item 3: Accessible Transport and Reliable Digital Connectivity

Physical encounter with others is a protective factor for social isolation. Affordable and available public transport enables physical connection to employment, education and training, health services, recreation, social networks, and social connections. PIA supports a distributive equity transport policy, whereby, communities enjoy similar levels and quality of public and active transport access to private car ownership.

Walkability is a major factor in neighbourhoods and cities to combat social isolation. PIA strongly supports the Government's recent *Planning (Walkable Neighbourhoods) Amendment Regulation 2020* and supports Local Governments to continue to invest in footpaths, shade trees, walking and cycling infrastructure in local areas.

The uneven distribution of reliable internet access across the State is a factor in social isolation. Reducing the barriers to internet access is critical to ensuring social and economic participation, equitable access to internet, band width and economic plans facilitates better outcomes in health, education and economic innovation.

Item 4: Secure and Well-Designed Housing

Community members living in poverty are least likely to have secure and stable housing. Secure housing is a protective factor for social isolation. The shortage of affordable and social housing in Queensland isolates individuals and families, which can also add to the risk of family violence in some vulnerable households¹⁰. PIA supports more investment in affordable and social housing

⁷ Tasker, M. (2019). Beyond Befriending: Cross-sectoral approaches to tackling social isolation. Local Government Information Unit: accessed at www.lgiu.org August 2021.

⁸ Projects for Public Spaces (nd.) The case for Healthy Places: Improving health outcomes through placemaking. Accessed at www.pps.org August 2021

⁹ Queensland Families and Communities Association. (2020). Neighbourhood Centre Survey Results 2020

¹⁰ Caroline Spiranovic, Nina Hudson, Romy Winter, Sonya Stanford, Kimberley Norris, Isabelle Bartkowiak-Theron & Kate Cashman (2021) Navigating risk and protective factors for family violence during and after the COVID-19 'perfect storm', *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, 33:1, 5-18, DOI: 10.1080/10345329.2020.1849933

and encourages the State to consider a range of alternative funding and tenure models to achieve this. PIA supports the government's [Housing Strategy to 2027](#) as significant progress in this area.

Recent experiences highlight the importance of common spaces for residents in medium and high-density homes. These spaces are regulated through planning schemes. The design and facilities in common spaces in medium and high-density housing need to provide the opportunity for the comfortable sharing of those spaces. Innovative community development programs to connect residents within these high-density settings is also required.¹¹

Over the next 20 years the number of people living alone will increase as the Queensland population ages. The design of small dwellings (often targeting lone person households and older people) needs to consider factors of sociability, as well as sustainability and affordability. Planning and design regulations can embed protective factors and ensure:

- a dwelling is sited and designed to address the street to participate in 'community life';
- the design and management of housing promotes 'good neighbour' relations, adequate indoor and outdoor space, and amenities are provided to support pet ownership.¹²

Item 5: Vibrant and Connected Neighbourhoods and Towns

Local access to food, medical services, education, public transport and employment has become highly valued with some communities already experiencing good walkable access. The historical fragmentation of a city into zones means that education, employment, food, leisure, health and social services are often distant from home, and each other, but this is changing¹³

The 20-minute neighbourhood concept identifies essential elements in a neighbourhood based on comfortable walking distances to these services. It also provides the opportunity to embed design strategies which foster social inclusion, community health and well-being into neighbourhood planning exercises. PIA already has an extensive [Healthy Spaces and Places Policy](#) and continue to advocate for greater small-scale planning at neighbourhood level.

Planning is ideally positioned to promote individual and community well-being and social connections by promoting "*pro-connection places, spaces and experiences*", and neighbourhoods and towns "*where there are easy opportunities for social interaction that allow the ability for people to choose when, who and where to meet*" (Halpern 1995)¹⁴. These strategies can be applied in established neighbourhoods (through urban renewal and urban acupuncture initiatives) and new neighbourhoods (through neighbourhood and master planning approaches). Many local governments are returning to dedicated neighbourhood planning and support for this can be enhanced to achieve an accessible and equitable neighbourhood.

¹¹ Ask-Lauren Community Concierge Project <https://citystudiovanancouver.com/projects/ask-lauren/>

¹² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2019) Social Isolation and Loneliness: Snapshot. Australia's Welfare 2019. Published 11 September 2019. Accessed at www.aihw.gov.au August 2021

¹³ Mees, P. (2010). Transport for suburbia: beyond the automobile age. London: Routledge.

¹⁴ Karg A, De Cotta T, Farmer J, Knox J, Adler V, Kamstra P, Aryani A (2020) Case Study: Auditing and Mapping Social Connection Infrastructure in Communities. Swinburne University Social Innovation Research Institute.

Item 6: Targeted Responses and Kindness as Policy

It is agreed that some groups in our communities are more likely to experience social isolation and loneliness than others. These groups include new Australians, those with insecure work, various family compositions often with single parents, those with mental and physical disabilities and low socio-economic sections of the community. We encourage targeted individual and group programs that focus on the needs of people in these groups.¹⁵

How planning can assist in identifying:

- **current investment that may be leveraged to prevent, mitigate and address the drivers; and**
- **the role and scope of a state-wide strategy**

Fundamentally PIA believes that many of the above strategies can be supported through minor focus changes in planning tools and activities such as:

- Minor amendments to the narrative of the Liveable Communities component of the and [State Planning Policy 2017](#), to promote a people focus as the foundation of built form. For example the [South East Queensland Regional Plan](#) commences this with the concept of fairness as a sustainability goal.
- Inclusion of minimum open space guidance for neighbourhood scale, higher density areas and at property scale to ensure the opportunities for spontaneous meetings and site or street scale gatherings
- Targeted funding programs to retrofit older neighbourhoods which creates social fabric, accessible communities, street activation, open space and shade which coincides with PIA's call for [action on climate](#). Physically healthy places contribute to social wellbeing
- Capacity building and education in our profession. PIA operates a robust professional development program and would welcome participation by social professionals to fully articulate the benefits and components of planning for a strong social fabric
- Development of tools such as a neighbourhood planning toolkit for social inclusion. Currently the profession has a range of non-statutory guidance which practitioners can access to ensure best practice approaches are employed. A toolkit may include practical guidance to develop small-scale local policies on community gardens, pocket parks, localised active transport strategies, as prioritised by those communities.

In summary, good planning, placemaking, neighbourhood planning, the provision of open space and a balanced approach to access and mobility can significantly contribute to a strong social fabric and combat social isolation and loneliness. PIA looks forward to assisting in the development of a social isolation strategy for Queensland.

¹⁵ Anderson, S., & Brownlie, J. (2019). *Public Policy and the infrastructure of kindness in Scotland*. Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh.

Should you wish to discuss the above, please contact Dr Laurel Johnson on [REDACTED], Stephanie Wyeth on [REDACTED] or Shannon Batch at [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely



Shannon Batch RPIA
President, Queensland Division