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

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## **Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland**

To the Committee Secretary

Despite the close living environment of a caravan park, social isolation and loneliness are surprisingly prevalent in these environments.

Approximately 44% of long-term residents in caravan parks or manufactured home parks reported in the 2016 census that was only one person residing in their dwelling, while a further 40% indicated there were two people residing in their dwelling in Queensland.

In contrast to the wider Australian population, only 10% of people reported living alone, with 26% living with one other person. This shows the increased propensity of caravan park residents to be living in a more isolated social situation than an average Australian.

Many of the individuals and couple living in caravan parks are isolated from their families, either by choice or as a result of circumstance.

Residents in caravan parks are also nearly twice as likely to require assistance with core activities (9.8%) compared to the rest of Australia (5.5%), for manufactured home parks, this percentage increases to 14.4% of residents. Of those requiring assistance in caravan parks and manufactured home parks at the time of the 2016 census, 37% lived alone across Australia – this is more than 2,000 resident's in caravan parks and manufactured home parks that identify as needing assistance but live alone.

A close living environment such as a caravan park can offer many benefits for people at risk of social isolation or loneliness. In parks with a high level of long term residents or long term tourists, it is not unusual to see the development of a social club that is created and operated by residents, providing social activities and a sense of belonging to people living or staying in that caravan park.

Unfortunately, for those living in caravan parks which have a greater focus of tourism, there is often not that same sense of community, and while there is an onsite manager, they have a full-time role without checking in on each of the residents in the park, or providing additional support services.

We believe there are a number of Government and community services already available to provide additional support which will allow individuals to age in place or live independently, however often the individuals needing the support are not aware of these services, do not believe they are eligible for them or are no longer able to make an appropriate assessment of their own needs.

**Early intervention and additional support are key drivers in ensuring that residents in Queensland can age in place and that those that need the support can get it.**

The caravan park or manufactured home park sector often finds that despite the fact a resident may not identify as needing assistance, there may be a better outcome or quality of life for the individual with the provision of additional support or living options.

Caravan park operators (and many other community managers) are in a unique position to assist the Government through early reporting to allow for appropriate intervention.

It should be noted that caravan park operators are not suitably qualified to make assessments of the needs of an individual. In many cases, the park manager may notice that a resident does not appear to be eating, has stopped caring about their personal hygiene, or is no longer showing the same level of care to the maintenance of their home, signs which indicate they may need additional assistance.

Many park operators have reported that where that have had a concern about a resident within their community, they have met with significant roadblocks and obstacles in identifying and accessing services and support for the resident as they are not a relative.

In speaking to our members, these caravan park operators advise they have spent many hours, in some cases days, trying to find appropriate support services for people within their communities. Due to the nature of their relationship with the individual they are informed that they are unable to arrange support for the person within their community, despite the fact the resident does not have any family or support network that can assist them.

## Recommendations

While we understand there are services available, there is currently a low level of knowledge of what these services are, where to find out more about the services and how to access them.

There is a need for a central Government hotline that would allow caravan park operators, community managers and even members of the public to identify individuals that are showing signs that they may need some additional assistance. This would allow the Government to ensure that an appropriate assessment was completed, and appropriate support offered. With a centralised reporting point, it would be possible ensure that the most appropriate services would be offered to the individual. Currently instead of the most appropriate services being offered, it is often the ones that agreed to provide support that are used, regardless of their appropriateness.

Caravan parks have advised us that they don't need to know the details of the support provided to a resident, or the conversation that the appropriate person (such as a social worker or community nurse) has with the resident, they just want confidence that everyone living or staying in their park is living in safe and secure environment with the appropriate support for their needs.

There are also many community programs currently available across Queensland. Providing information on additional services available, such as community groups, community fitness activities, short courses through the local library, etc. to communities such as caravan parks, particularly free or low-cost services due to the demographic, may encourage additional take up of these services across the community.

Volunteering is another excellent opportunity for individuals to add value to their lives and to develop community. Easy access to information on what volunteering opportunities may support participation.

In the caravan park environment, only 65% of dwellings have internet access. This means that 35% of households in a caravan park are unable to source information on services and volunteering opportunities online. Finding communication methods which do not rely on the internet and emails, such as flyers with Centrelink notices, may support these individuals.

## Examples of current situations in caravan parks

With our members working on the coal face, in an environment, that due to the primary demographic, is more pre-disposed to social isolation and in some cases loneliness, they often feel unsupported in ensuring that their residents are provided the opportunity to access services appropriate to their circumstance.

Following are some case studies of individuals currently living in caravan parks where additional support may be beneficial and allow them to stay where they are for longer.

### Socially Isolated Due to Illness or Injury

A caravan park in Queensland that is primarily a tourist park has advised that one of their residents had a stroke last year and is unable to use his left arm. He also has no vehicle and is living in a caravan park that is not within walking distance of the nearest town. Due to his physical limitations and lack of transport he is unable to get work, despite wanting to work.

The park managers report that he often walks up to the closest work site where they collect wood for to be turned into chips for smokers (barbecues), a kilometre and a half up the road, to help out. This is largely for the company of the workers at the site.

### Dementia

There is a 91 year old female with dementia living in one of our member parks. She refuses to provide the name or contact information for any family members and the park managers believe she is estranged from her family. The park managers strongly suspect that she is no longer eating properly. She has not been seen in or around the shower block or the laundry and the park managers are of the view she is not showering or doing her laundry.

The resident calls the park office up to seven times a day to ask things like whether she has paid her rent. She also speaks with tourist guests and tells them information which is not always accurate as a result of her dementia, and on several occasions has asked tourists to take her into town for various reasons. Due to the location of the caravan park and the fact this resident cannot drive, and has no car, she needs to take a taxi to town at a cost of \$30 each way. It is not uncommon that when she gets to town she forgets to shop.

Due to her dementia she can often be nasty, and if someone comes to provide assistance it is not uncommon for her to slam the door in their face.

The park managers have spent the past twelve months trying to find additional support for this resident, including calling Bluecare and My Age Care without result. At present local council representatives are trying to assist the park managers with this situation. With their nearest major regional centre nearly a two hour drive away, it is only recently, that a social worker has checked in with this resident.

### Mental Health and/or Drug and Alcohol Issues

It is becoming far more common for a person with a mental health condition to seek accommodation in a caravan park due to the cheaper availability of accommodation, and in some cases the fact that they can be part of a community and receive support from other residents on the property. Unfortunately, not all residents wish to be a part of the community in which they live, and without support, can end up living in a situation that is not helping their condition.

A park in North Queensland has, until recently, had a 40 year old woman living in a tent. This guest arrived as a tourist however due to the current housing costs in their region was unable to find alternative housing anywhere in the town and stayed on for 18 months in this tent which overtime degraded to a point where it was unliveable.

This woman is suffering from mental health issues and the park managers believe that she is abusing pain killers.

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Further, she is estranged from her family and rarely leaves her tent, including to shower or use the laundry.

On several occasions this guest has threatened to commit suicide and the park managers have reached a point where they will not speak to her unless there is a witness as it is common that she will misinterpret the conversation or claim that the person that spoke to her threatened her.

After nine months of living in the tent it started to fall apart, the park managers advised this guest that she needed to find more suitable accommodation. They advised they were happy for her to continue living in the park but that she would need a more sturdy tent and that she would be moved into the area of the park where the long term residents live. The park managers offered support, advising they would take her to the shops to buy a new tent and that they would assist her in moving her belongings however each time they got to the date that she was due to move sites she would simply refuse to move.

The park managers have attempted to get support for the resident however have been informed that as they are not a family member and due to confidentiality no one can speak to them or provide support.

### **Better Suited to a Boarding House Environment**

One of our member parks advised they have a resident who lived in their park with his mother who has since passed away. Since the death of his mother, he has no remaining family or support network. This resident is now a senior and has a steel plate in his head and limited mental capacity.

While he is seen around the caravan park, it is not on a regular basis. Further the park managers are confident that he is not receiving support as any support service would need to enter the park using the boom gates which are in place at the front of the park.

The personal hygiene of this resident is often lacking however if one of the park staff reminds him, he will go and clean himself up.

The park manager has spent days in the past on the phone trying to get this resident support, including calls to Centrelink and a number of community organisations designed to provide support to individuals like this resident. Unfortunately, when the park manager speaks to the resident about getting additional support the resident perceives it as an attempt to remove him from the park and gets quite upset.

This is an excellent example of a resident that would likely thrive in a boarding house environment where there would be additional support available to them.

This park manager noted that they collect copies of the insurance policy for each owner occupied dwelling in their park and that this year they noticed this resident was paying nearly double what the other residents were paying for the same insurance. The park manager suggested to the resident that he should get a second quote and as a result is saving a significant amount of money annually. Making financial decisions like this is another area where this resident could be supported.

### **Other medical conditions**

We have received reports of a resident in a member caravan park (in the Greater Brisbane region) that is a senior and is deaf. The caravan park staff provide some support and assistance to this resident by doing simple tasks which he is unable to do such as calling the doctor to make a medical appointment.

Living in a caravan park suits this gentleman as he can interact with the staff and guests at the park. To help out around the park, he collects all of the cans and bottles left by guests and donates them proceeds to a local deaf charity. The park has provided him with a t-shirt that says "Park Volunteer" and advises that he is deaf as they had received guest reports about the grumpy rude man collecting bottles, when he wasn't being rude, he simply couldn't hear the guest.

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This gentleman has family in North Queensland who have tried to provide support such as a safe alert button however the gentleman has refused this support.

The park is particularly concerned about the need for welfare checks. As this resident is deaf, he can't hear them knock on the door and they can't enter the dwelling to check on him. While at present he is active, he is getting to an age where he needs help.

### **Other issues exacerbated by Social Isolation**

#### **Hoarding**

We have several reports of incidences where a resident in a park keeps to themselves and is rarely seen. They pay their rent and are not problematic generally. However, they are keeping their dwelling in a very poor and dilapidated state and hoard belongings.

Hoarding is a common problem that is hard to manage, and that often has mental health implications. If the person owns the dwelling, it is very difficult to get them to comply with a minimum living standard that does not compromise the safety and health aspects of other persons living around them. The resident generally believes their living conditions are fine, but to anyone else, they are not.

Park managers report that they have not been able to find a service or any support to assist these residents.

#### **Dilapidated Dwellings**

It is not hard to find dwellings in a caravan park that have been there for a very long time and are in such a state of disrepair that they will, and do, represent a flying materials hazard should a weather event occur. These types of dwellings often have roofs covered in tarpaulins for water proofing and have severe structural problems due the fatigue of the original construction materials.

The owners of these dwellings generally do not have the financial means to repair or renovate, and normally, they just do not have the will to do so either. Generally, due to their social isolation, they do not have people around them that are willing and able to assist them to repair their dwelling to a point of liveability.

### **About the Sector**

A caravan park is a complex and multifaceted environment, with many people and personalities occupying space in a very close living environment. Caravan parks in Queensland offer a range of accommodation from short or long-term sites for tourists, through to residential accommodation which may be in the form of an empty site or a dwelling already in place on a site owned by the caravan park.

Short or long-term tenants at a caravan park may bring their own dwelling (e.g. a caravan or motorhome) or may chose to rent a dwelling owned by the caravan park. Caravan park owned dwellings can vary from onsite vans, to motel style rooms, right through to self-contained cabins which may include their own bathroom and kitchen facilities.

These properties include many sites in close proximity to each other however this does not automatically ensure a sense of community with some residents preferring to keep to themselves.

There were over 20,000 individuals or 0.42% of all residents in Queensland, living in caravan parks at the time of the 2016 ABS Census. Queensland is also the state with the highest density of residents living in caravan parks which may be due, in part, to the warmer climate which appeals to retirees looking to escape the colder southern climates.



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The average age of residents in caravan parks at the time of the last census was 57, up from 55 years at the time of the 2011 census. Approximately two thirds of caravan park residents are over 55 years of age and males represent 59% of all these residents.

There is an increased propensity of caravan park residents to be living in a more isolated social situation than an average Australian. The low cost of living and surrounding community are one of the reasons that these residents have chosen to live in a caravan park environment, equally there are many residents that choose to live in a caravan park as they feel it provides them with a level of anonymity.

Only 36% of residents in caravan parks and manufactured home parks are engaged in the labour force or seeking employment which is reflective of the average age of residents in these communities. Of those residents who identified as being employed, the average personal income was approximately \$573 per week, with 43% earning between \$300 and \$500 per week.

The average wage for caravan park and manufactured home park residents (who are employed full-time or part-time) is 37% below the Australian average weekly wage of \$903. Please note, the census does not discern between income streams, so social benefits, pensions and salaries are included collectively.

A total of 33% of residents in caravan parks and manufactured home estates reside outside of major urban areas, compared to just 13% of all Australians who live regionally. These regional settings result in many residents experiencing highly variable wages (as part of a seasonal labour force) and a lack of services compared to their metropolitan counterparts.

Residents in caravan parks are nearly twice as likely to require assistance with core activities (9.8%) compared to the rest of Australia (5.5%). In general, the need for assistance has increased which is reflective of the ageing population. Of those requiring assistance in caravan parks and manufactured home parks at the time of the 2016 census, 37% lived alone.

Should you have any questions about this submission I would be happy to speak with you further and can be contacted on the details on page 1 of this submission.

Kind regards



Michelle Weston

Chief Executive Officer

### **About Caravan Parks Association of Queensland**

Caravan Parks Association of Queensland Ltd (CPAQ) is the peak industry body representing caravan parks in Queensland. Established in 1966, we provide a united and informed voice for the Queensland caravan parks industry. As a professional, solution focused association, we encourage and support industry best practice across all areas of business by providing our members with leadership, support, networking, professional development, and promotional opportunities.

There are currently 445 full and associate members of CPAQ, made up of caravan parks (catering for tourists and residents) and campgrounds, large and small, from all corners of the State, industry suppliers, tourism businesses, plus regional and local tourism organisations.

We seek to work with both state and local governments to balance the needs of the consumer with those of the Government and industry. Further we actively strive to ensure not only that minimum standards within parks are met, but that over time these industry standards are in fact driven higher.

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### Caravanning Queensland

We trade under the brand **Caravanning Queensland** which joins the two related but separate peak industry bodies in Queensland:



**Caravan Parks Association of Queensland (CPAQ)** the voice of the caravan park owners and operators and the associated supply chain in Queensland.

**Caravan Trade & Industries Association of Queensland (CTIAQ)** the voice of the trade sector in the caravan and camping industry in Queensland with a membership made up predominantly of retailers, manufacturers, hirers, repairers, and suppliers in the caravan and camping industries.