



Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation

Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to write a submission to highlight the significant role that we and all community centres play in addressing social isolation and loneliness within our communities. We support the Queensland Families and Communities Association (QFCA) recommendations to this inquiry; Community and Neighbourhood Centre's are central to addressing social isolation and loneliness within communities.

This submission thus provides information from three Neighbourhood Centres in Brisbane: The Community Place (Kalinga and Stafford); Northside Connect (Nundah Neighbourhood Centre), and Picabeen Community Centre based in Mitchelton. In 2015 Zillmere Community Centre, Picabeen, Nundah and The Community Place formed a consortium which was called the Northside Alliance of Neighbourhood Centres (NANC) and this collaboration stemmed from our strong relationships and friendship and the purpose being to work together to advocate for our centres. At the time of writing this submission, Zillmere was undergoing a change in their Manager who has been there for over 16 years and were not able to participate in this document, however the experience detailed by the other three centres is reflective of the vast work that is also done by the Zillmere Community Centre. Ultimately, our centres play a key role in providing community support and are safe and welcoming places to visit for all people within in the Brisbane North Region.

Social Isolation in the Brisbane area

For many people, traversing the COVID-19 pandemic has been defined as living a personal trauma. For almost two years COVID-19 has become almost the only news, and it is news that is inevitably almost exclusively bad. Such an alarming atmosphere has had adverse effects on peoples' mental health and well-being. The pandemic has caused economic impact in the way of income loss and job losses and/or the emotional impact of domestic violence, acute isolation, and loneliness.

Social relations have been curtailed by lockdown confinement measures and physical or social distancing. Rituals that are inherent to being human: handshakes; hugs; kisses; and many others, have been suppressed, so loneliness and isolation have thus resulted. For now, no person knows whether nor when they might return completely to their old way of life. The inability to make plans or engage in specific activities that used to be intrinsic parts of peoples' normal life and vital sources of pleasure (like visiting family and friends abroad) has left people confused and demoralized. In reality, people are inherently social beings and companionship, and social interactions are a vital component of living. The state of being, now, has left everyone confused with life as it is.

The prime role of community centres is to address social isolation and provide comfort for displaced and marginalised persons suffering from social exclusion. Even prior to the Pandemic Neighbourhood Centres were focused on providing activities, support, programs, events with the focus on the reduction of social isolation and loneliness. The pandemic has exacerbated social isolation and loneliness even more so now though. At this point in writing, Brisbane had been undergoing an extended period of lockdown and this setback in people's morale and wellbeing has been intensified by the sense of futility in not knowing when the lockdown will cease. In these times of the pandemic, neighbourhood centres are primed to assist the community and have done so even in lockdown. There has been information to suggest though that Lifeline has received increased phone calls from people suffering from the effects of the lockdown – especially small businesses suffering from closure and being financially impacted but also families needing to home-school their children, whilst working full time jobs from home. Loneliness and isolation have therefore increased and not only are older persons impacted, but now we are seeing people of all ages suffering from forced withdrawal of their daily activities.

Neighbourhood Centres, Loneliness and Social Isolation

Neighbourhood Centres offer a community solution of addressing loneliness and social isolation in Brisbane. These centres connect with community to attempt to alleviate social issues impacting on people, providing their clients with salient information to cope with such circumstances. As such, these centres are often a "first port of call" for the community experiencing issues of one type or another. These centres do not discriminate and are open to everyone, regardless of gender, sexuality, race, religion, age, or social status. Building connections between individuals is a big part of what community centres strive to attain. As one client of The Community Place mentioned, "If I

didn't attend the Taiso sessions and meet people, I would be sitting in my lounge room all day each day."

Neighbourhood Centres are under resourced and at present the funding received by each Community Centre by the Queensland Government does not cover all of the operational costs of each service. In contrast the dollar value that is developed and contributed with this funding is much higher, as an example The Community Place received \$182,591 funding in the previous calendar year, but the inherent value was much higher where it equated to \$633,446 due to the improved quality of life through social connection, volunteer contribution and services provided. The community value was \$3.47 for every \$1 of Neighbourhood Centre Funding and over \$129.27 for every hour The Community Place was in use. Neighbourhood Centres, although very grateful for the funding received, are under resourced for the work that is performed every day. It was only a few short years ago when the Newman Government also removed 10% of all Neighbourhood Centres funding which had a significant impact on the sector. This was not reinstated and has meant that each Centre has had to address this shortfall.

These centres provide so many opportunities for the community members and they play a vital role in reducing social isolation and loneliness within their vicinity. Increases in programs thanks to funding would allow more community members to be assisted, with increased friendships and connections being formed. Increases in self-esteem arise when people begin to engage with others and become part of a connected network of fellow human beings. An enhanced sense of wellbeing is vital for people and being part of a community allows this transformation to occur.

Information on The Community Place

The Community Place is a not-for-profit community organisation that provides activities, places, opportunities, and services for people to connect, share and learn together. The Community Place Inc. originally known as the Woolloowin Community Centre was the first community centre to gain funding in Brisbane in 1983 under the old Community and Individual Support Program (CISP) program, catering to the local community with the development of a playgroup. The centre's focus back then was on children however quickly expanded to include free counselling via family support programs and group activities through the Community Development program. In recognition of the expansion of programs and support through the Inner Northern areas of Brisbane, the organisation

changed its name in the early 2000's to The Community Place to recognise the strong ethos of the service as a place where community members could meet, share and learn together.

The Community Place has grown in stature with the addition of The Community Place Stafford and then more recently the move to a much larger premises at their newly renovated space at the old Kalinga Bowls Club. The Community Place has been thankful for the support and assistance received from the Queensland Government Neighbourhood Centre Funding Program and the Brisbane City Council Community Facilities and Grants Programs and Community Leasing Program. The mission of The Community Place is to facilitate the development of wellbeing for all members of the community. Provision of a connected and inclusive service to support social, cultural and community growth is essential.

Each week The Community Place welcomes over 150 community members to a variety of programs ranging from English as a Second Language (ESL) Classes, Book Clubs, Health and Wellbeing Programs, free exercise programs such as GOLD and ACTIVE PARKS, Crochet Groups, Board Games Groups, and Social Restaurant Groups. The Community Place also organises Playgroups, Mental Health Support Groups, Cultural Youth Groups, Adult Literacy Programs and more. The Centre also each year organises a wide range of large community events such as Kids Halloween Events with over 500 community members attending, Family Christmas Events in the park, events for Child Protection Week, Seniors Month, Domestic Violence Prevention Month and more.

The Community Place's approach to Loneliness and Isolation

The Community Place has a strong commitment to addressing the experience of social isolation and loneliness for community members living within the Brisbane North areas. Loneliness is at the core of most of the work that we do within our Stafford and Kalinga Centres. The Centre has a range of ways our programs, activities and events assist in reducing the experience of social isolation and loneliness in the community. The following examples are not limited to the vast array of work and groups that take place each year at each Centre, but they are reflective of the essence of the work that occurs at each Community Centre.

Is an ESL Class just a place to learn English? At The Community Place English Classes form a very important role in the lives of the students, tutors, and teachers. The English Skills are the by-product of a much more important role that each class plays, and that is creating social and community connections. Offering 3 programs per week volunteers and students meet with The Community

Place staff to create a welcoming and nurturing social experience for all community members. A Community Crochet Group of nearly 20 older community members meets each week at the Centre to create a range of items which are then donated to charity. The social relationships created through this activity are immeasurable with empirical confirmation that many of the community members highlighting that prior to their involvement in the group they had not smiled in a long time, that they had felt lonely and disconnected in their lives.

Accessing funds to undertake time limited projects such as a health project last year encouraged very simple movement and health for older Australians. The health benefits were both physical and social/emotional with one community member highlighting that they had not left their lounge room in years and that the group had basically saved her sanity and made her feel happy to be connected and important to other people. The challenge for the Community Centre in this instance was to work very hard to continue this program and identify and source funding to continue the group once the project period had concluded. We were able to achieve this but for only a time limited period of twelve months.

These are only a few examples of the groups and work being organised each week to address social isolation and loneliness in the community. The Community Place has a multitude of groups and programs with each and every one of these groups reporting a very similar purpose and outcome for each activity. Both the Kalinga and Stafford centre provide various training programs through government agencies as well as a multitude of hirers for various activities.

Social Connections and community building are at the heart of our work within the community and the outcome of this is the reduction of social isolation and loneliness in the community. We do this within a strengths-based approach where community members may only willingly identify later down the track that, "Hey you know I feel fantastic now, I never realised I was feeling this way." Our purpose is to encourage and connect with community members in a positive and uplifting way where they feel as they always belonged in this space that we have created.

Information on The Nundah Neighbourhood Centre

Based in Nundah, Northside Connect is a non-for-profit organisation that offers legal advice, domestic violence support and family/community services to those located within the north side of Brisbane. Northside Connect consists of three main support services including the Nundah Neighbourhood Centre, the Brisbane North Legal Service and Domestic Violence & Family Support

services. Each of these services are based off three key values: social inclusion, access to justice and enhancing community safety. The centre has been operating for over 30 years and offers a range of different activities, classes and programs that are run by staff and volunteers. Northside Connect provides a safe, accessible, and inclusive space for the community to come together, receive support and make meaningful connections with one another. Like other neighbourhood centres, Northside Connect plays an essential role in reducing the impacts of social isolation and loneliness within our community.

The Nundah Neighbourhood Centre's approach to Loneliness and Isolation

Social isolation and loneliness continuously have detrimental impacts on people's lives every day. They both are considered significant health and wellbeing issues in Australia and can have massive impacts on individual's mental and physical health. With the unpredictability of COVID-19, continuous lockdowns and harsh restrictions, social isolation and loneliness is even more prominent within the community. To help reduce the negative impacts of social isolation and loneliness, Northside Connect and other Neighbourhood Centres aim to provide a welcoming environment that allows people to safely connect and receive support or make new connections. This is done through a range of ways, including activities such as food relief, monthly barbeques, community garden, sewing group, yoga class, ESL class, a 50+ social group. Legal advice and support, family and domestic violence support and referrals to different services that may provide more effective assistance are on offer. Each activity is aimed to be socially inclusive, provide access to social justice, enhance community safety and engagement. People are also able to come together in a safe environment to learn new skills, make friends and gain an effective support system. This essentially helps to build relationships within the community and help reduce the impacts of social isolation and loneliness.

For example, over the past 20 years Northside Connect has successfully provided a place for weekly ESL classes to be conducted in ways which see a variety of ages participate in these weekly sessions. The ESL program offers limited English proficient students the opportunity to become competent in their speaking, reading and composition of the English language. For participants who are from a non-English speaking background living in Australia, they can find themselves often socially isolated due to their lack of English proficiency. The importance of neighbourhood centres running such programs as ESL classes can really be exemplified by one lady's story during Covid lockdown in 2020.

“Upon arriving in Australia 5 years ago I have been attending Northside Connects ESL class twice a week as I speak very limited English. ESL classes have improved my English, but I still rely on weekly classes to improve. Two years ago, my husband died, and I have no other family in Australia to help me with my English. In 2020 when Covid first arrived in Australia I needed to make a doctor’s appointment, but I was asked to do an over the phone appointment. I had to cancel the appointment as my English still isn’t good enough. I then had to wait longer to speak to the doctor in person”.

Without programs such as ESL classes, non-English speaking individuals not only miss out on the opportunity to participate in weekly social interactions but to also immerse themselves in learning a second language. This language assists them to navigate and partake in day-to-day activities that English speaking individuals often take for granted.

Students undertaking placement at Northside Connect, were given the opportunity to sit down and talk to a few different service users. These users have been attending the centre for a number of years and specifically use the centre for either ESL or sewing groups. Upon asking for their permission to participate in this submission the first question that was asked was simply addressing what their reasoning was for coming to the centre.

One of the ladies’ responses as to the reasons why she first came to the centre was through the centres ESL program in which she attends class twice a week as she arrived in Australia not knowing how to speak English. From attending the ESL classes, she felt comfortable to interact with other members from the community in which she found the confidence to also join the sewing group which meets once a week. She has gained the confidence to successfully go out into the community feeling safe and less anxious.

Another lady discussed how by attending the centre for the sewing group she has found a community in which she has built many connections and established lasting friendships over the past 6 years she has been attending the centre.

When Covid first hit in early 2020, Northside Connect had to cease all classes and groups leaving a group of older individuals vulnerable, lonely, isolated, and disconnected from their community. One of the participants mentioned that she had to find new ways in which to handle/cope with the Covid restrictions. She mentions that she really struggled to find a new balance and routine as without attending the centre for her weekly classes, she felt an immense sense of loneliness and very isolated due to Covid restricting her from also seeing her family.

When asked whether they feel less socially isolated attending the centre, all the participants agreed that by Northside Connect conducting weekly ESL classes, sewing groups and other activities, they feel a strong sense of community even when these classes and groups are only run for two hours once and twice a week. Coming to the centre brings people much joy and happiness as they mention it is the 'highlight of their week to interact with other community members'.

Information on the Picabeen Community Centre

Picabeen Community Centre has been a part of the Mitchelton and the greater community for 29 years. Our service supports people experiencing social isolation and loneliness through the provision of an array of opportunities for people to connect, engage, and socialise. Picabeen welcomes people from all walks of life by incorporating a respectful, compassionate, and holistic approach to everyone who accesses our services.

Each week the centre welcomes over 120 people through the doors for social groups, youth support, play groups, activity groups and volunteering. This is alongside the frequent visitors to the second-hand clothing 'op' shop at a different location. Each week Picabeen provides Emergency Relief in form of food parcels to approximately 30 people per week (including individuals and families), as well as approximately 20-25 hot meals for people at the community BBQ. Picabeen hires out its spaces to run workshops, information sessions, employment opportunities, counselling, and everything in between. Many events are hosted in the community, with the annual Christmas event usually welcoming approximately 100 people for the community celebration and another 100 people who receive food hampers.

For the members that are involved in the many activities at Picabeen, they are often expressing their feelings of joy and happiness when attending the centre. They enjoy the opportunity to help, gain confidence, build their skills, give back, and connect with their community. One of the members states *'coming here gives me the opportunity to contribute to the community at large, to be able to help. You get to meet a diverse group of people – the students, volunteers, staff, and service-users from all different backgrounds. It's great to be involved and welcomed by everyone.'*

Each quarter, Picabeen reports data that has been collected to the Department of Communities; the data including the number of unique service users and type of interactions. Last quarter, 501 people used the services. This is the largest number in over 6 years. 311 (62%) of the people using the services have reported improved feelings of social connectedness. These high numbers are

primarily due to the impact of the pandemic as well as the weekly community BBQ. The BBQ is a free event held at Picabeen, which brings together volunteers and local community members. It creates the opportunity for people to check in, socialise and sit with each other over a warm meal. It is especially busy after lockdown; anecdotally this is due to people being eager to be out of their homes. This regular event has become a real staple in the community, attracting on average 20 people per week. This data does not show Picabeen's overall impact on the community, as it does not acknowledge the volunteers within the data. Picabeen volunteers are the heart of the community centre and without them, the centre would not be able to function.

One of the volunteers and service- users, who has helped at Picabeen for 3 years, states:

"When I come to the community centre, it breaks up my day. It is better than staying at home with 4 walls as Covid was really isolating for me. Most of my support workers had to cancel and it was difficult. At the community centre, I get to talk to people, interact, and meet new people. I get to learn new things and interact with people that I wouldn't normally interact with. I like going to the BBQ because the social interaction is important for me. I've made many friends here; I love making people feel welcome and giving them a place to feel comfortable."

A workshop teacher, who has volunteered with Picabeen for 7 years, states:

"For some people, coming to the community centre works really well. My daughter with a disability really enjoys coming here. It was especially hard not coming to the centre during the Covid lockdown, and I had more of a low mood. I have made some really good friends here; people I have something in common with, like sewing for example."

Statements like these are not uncommon at Picabeen and are echoed by several other volunteers. It has been clear that Covid lockdowns have majorly affected Picabeen's community members, as they are unable to attend the regular classes and events. This causes further isolation and loneliness as for many, visiting the centre is one of their only forms of social connection. Even though the centre is under-resourced, the part-time staff (there is not enough funding to have full-time staff) and volunteers have made intentional efforts to stay in contact with those volunteers and service users experiencing isolation; this has been done through making regular phone calls and having Zoom meetings, however, these interactions are often spread out too thinly.

Picabeen's approach to Loneliness and Isolation

Picabeen is a place of learning, gathering and connecting. This is embedded through the day-to-day interactions, social groups, playgroups, activities, second-hand clothing 'op' shop, events, and workshops. There are numerous opportunities for volunteers and students with currently 60 volunteers, and four Social Work students completing their placements. The wonderful committee members are also volunteers. Here's what one of the committee members has to say about Picabeen:

"I volunteer for Picabeen, so I am able to support a community organisation that has limited funding versus demand from community need, to be able to offer my skills in governance, funding acquisitions and management and service delivery contexts. Picabeen has a commitment to the community, a variety of volunteer programs, and a friendly and welcoming environment."

Picabeen holds a weekly safe space for young people who identify within the LGBTQIA+ community, or for those who are allies of that community or may be curious. This group has had a significant impact in connecting young people and building friendships. It has provided a space of curiosity, safety, and acceptance. Local schools are now acknowledging the importance of these groups, as they are aware of the need of the young people within the area. The schools have asked Picabeen's Youth Workers to help set up their groups. Funding for these groups has not been renewed, but Picabeen continues to provide this service (in a reduced capacity) as it is recognised to be a significant need. If adequate funding was received, there would be greater provision of ongoing support to the schools, rather than a single visit. Picabeen would be able to provide greater resources to encourage further engagement from the young people. This is merely one example of how Picabeen addresses loneliness and social isolation. Bringing people together in a space where they are comfortable is within the spirit of Picabeen, and it's what is seen as being a major part of community centres' role within the community.

Conclusion

Community Centres play a significant role by relieving social isolation, loneliness, and boredom. They help reduce the need for intensive (and expensive) services through providing low or no cost activities and services. A welcoming, non-clinical, non-threatening and relaxed space is offered. Centres provide learning opportunities by engaging groups and hosting classes that have a central focus on creating connections within the community. They open a window for networking and for

people to build and form great friendships, to volunteer and to be involved. Alongside this, social action is involved to help raise community awareness, to educate and to address social injustice thus, more funding is required.

There has been a sharp increase in the number of new people walking through community centre doors and needing assistance in recent times. The cost of living has increased, rental prices, high unemployment, and underemployment rates. People report that they are experiencing greater challenges and hardships. There has been increased demand to provide emergency relief for many of the people accessing our services; this includes (but is not limited to) Go Cards, everyday grocery items and clothing. With limited resources, Community Centres do not have enough to provide for everyone.

Community Centres have been there for those who experience hardships, vulnerabilities, and isolation on an ongoing basis, recently an increase of people for their first time are having issues with their health, wellbeing, unemployment, and their finances. Community Centres play a central role in reducing social isolation, loneliness and increasing the wellbeing and self-esteem of many people. People are given an opportunity to connect, feel safe and supported, to gain skills and build friendships. The consequences of not dealing with the current crisis might end up costing the Government millions; as some of our service-users may end up in places like the hospital, the justice system, or rehabilitation.

The Community Place, the Nundah Neighbourhood Community Centre and the Picabeen Community Centre are invested in transforming the lives of its community members. We agree that social isolation and loneliness has increased since the pandemic began and continues to do so. By providing suitable programs and encouraging those that feel displaced, our centres can provide support, connection, and empowerment of our communities. Our centres all support the Queensland Families and Communities Association's (QFCA) recommendation to this inquiry to position Neighbourhood Centres as key community-based organisations to address loneliness and social isolation in society.