ORDINARY COUNCIL   **18 AUGUST 2021**

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS
SUBMISSION

REPORT OF: Community Services Manager

REPORT OVERVIEW

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Queensland Government, through the Community Support and Services Committee are undertaking a Parliamentary Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness. In relation to this, the Mayor received a letter on 23 July 2021 from the Hon Leeanne Enoch, the Minister for Communities and Housing, the Minister for Digital Economy and the Minister for the Arts, inviting Council to make a submission.

Council's proposed submission is based around the following headings, which are directly linked to the questions contained within the Inquiry terms of reference:

- Drivers and impact of social isolation and loneliness.
- Initiatives addressing social isolation and loneliness.
- Future opportunities.

Criteria: Choose an item.

CORPORATE PLAN PRIORITY

Healthy connected community (HC)

RECOMMENDATIONS

IT IS RECOMMENDED:

1.   That Council endorse the submission as outlined in this report as part of the Queensland Government Parliamentary Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness.

REPORT DETAILS

INTERESTED PARTIES

This Inquiry has the potential to impact the broader community as most people at different stages are at risk of feeling a sense of social isolation and loneliness. The other interested parties are the service providers that deliver invaluable support across the community to those residents that are impacted by the mental health challenges associated with social isolation and loneliness.

PURPOSE OF REPORT/BACKGROUND

The Queensland Government, through the Community Support and Services Committee are undertaking a Parliamentary Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness. In relation to this, the Mayor received a letter on 23 July 2021 from the Hon. Leeanne Enoch, the Minister for Communities and Housing, the Minister for Digital Economy and the Minister for the Arts, inviting Council to make a submission.

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The basis of the submission is to be guided by a series of questions as outlined in the Inquiry terms of reference, which include:

- The nature and extent of the impact of social isolation and loneliness in Queensland, including but not limited to:
    - Identification of and consultation with vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals or groups at significant risk across the life course.
    - The interplay of COVID-19 with this issue.
- The causes and drivers of social isolation and loneliness, including those unique to Queensland.
- The protective factors known to mitigate social isolation and loneliness.
- The benefits of addressing social isolation and loneliness, examples of successful initiatives undertaken nationally and internationally and how to measure social isolation and loneliness in Queensland to determine if implemented strategies are effective.
- 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:
    - 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
    - Targeted support to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and those most at risk
- The role, scope and priorities of a state-wide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness, considering interactions with existing Queensland and national strategies.

Based on the above, the focus of Council's submission will address each of the above-mentioned questions under three key headings:

- Drivers and impact of social isolation and loneliness.
- Initiatives addressing social isolation and loneliness.
- Future opportunities.

Given the limited timeframe available to prepare the submission, there hasn't been the opportunity to undertake detailed consultation with the community in relation to this submission, so the feedback is based around experience over the last 12 to 18 months, and targeted conversations with key local service providers.

Drivers and Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness

The drivers and impacts of social isolation and loneliness go far beyond just these specific themes, and in reality, they are linked to broader mental health related challenges that have the potential to impact all sections of the community. We know that mental health challenges can be the driver for other impacts such as homelessness, anti-social/criminal behaviour, domestic and family violence, and addiction (gambling, drugs and alcohol) to name a few.

Logan is one of the fastest growing regions in south east Queensland, and with significant population growth projected for communities such as Park Ridge, Yarrabilba and Flagstone, if community and social infrastructure is not delivered as these communities grow then social isolation and loneliness can become a real problem. As an example, we recently heard a story of a local resident who because they were in a socially isolated situation became concerningly active in gambling. The major intervention for this person was getting involved in activities at their local community centre. The programs and services that are delivered from our community centres, libraries and in our parks are sometimes literally the only social interaction people have.

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Domestic and family violence is another major issue that can be heightened as a direct result of social isolation. Surveys conducted by the Queensland Domestic Violence Services Network found that during periods of lockdown and social isolation the risk of violence against women and children increases, whilst access to support services reduces as a result of these providers needing to close their services temporarily. Once the services can open again, the challenge then becomes about having the capacity to be able to manage the level of support required.

In addition to the above, according to Queensland Police Service (QPS) official crime statistics, breaches of domestic violence protection orders were among the top 5 reported offences for the City of Logan in 2020/2021. When comparing these results with 2019/2020, breaches of domestic violence protection orders increased by 20.4 per cent since 2019/2020, elevating it to the third highest offence category for the City in 2020/2021.

When comparing this to the rest of Queensland, analysis of the QPS 2020/2021 crime data for the State shows that domestic violence protection orders has also increased significantly for Queensland, with an increase of 13 per cent compared to 2019/2020. As a result, breaches of domestic and family violence protection orders were the fourth highest offence category in Queensland during 2020/2021, despite not being in the top 5 offence categories during the previous year.

Based on a review of relevant research the main explanation for the significant increase in the rate of domestic violence protection orders in Logan and Queensland during 2020/2021, is that these rates spike during and post large-scale crises such as, natural disasters and pandemics as these situations result in increased levels of trauma, stress and isolation.

The far reaching social and economic disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the psychological and mental well-being of individuals across our community.

Mental illness is very common with around one in five Australians experiencing a mental illness each year. The most common mental illnesses are depression, anxiety and substance use disorders, with mental illnesses often occurring in combination. Overall, young people (18-24 years old) have the highest prevalence of mental illness than any other age group in Australia and are particularly at risk of not receiving adequate mental health care.

There are critical gaps in mental health services here in our community and we need increased support through long-term, localised solutions. Some of the key statistics relating to mental illness in the community include:

- In 2018 Logan had a suicide rate of 18.06 deaths per every 100,000 people. This number has been steadily increasing from 17.78 in 2017, and 12.40 in 2016.
- Mental illness is also the highest contributor (20%) to the First Nations burden of disease in Queensland as First Nations people experience more ill-health than non-Indigenous people. The social and emotional health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a priority to improve the health disparity.
- Males are at a higher risk of suicide and account for 3 out of 4 suicides, there is a need to support men and families more as males are less likely to see support than females.
- In 2016, Logan had a youth disengagement rate of 15.6%, meaning young people aged 15-24 years who are not working and not undertaking any form of education.
- Our culturally and linguistically diverse community face challenges such as language barriers and differences in cultural practices, making it more difficult to navigate and access health services. People from diverse backgrounds may also have complex settlement and adjustment issues and require support for trauma and managing new environments.
- It has been identified that there are a lack of services and support for men's mental health.

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During the initial stages of COVID-19 in 2020 and the first major lockdown, some of our vulnerable sections of the community, including seniors, culturally and linguistically diverse, the First Nations community, our youth and lower socio-economic areas, were forced into socially isolated situations where they were required to utilise digital technology to stay connected, and for these sections of the community this generated some significant challenges. Some of the direct impacts we observed during this time include:

- COVID-19 led to the closure of schools and a move towards a remote, online model of learning. This revealed a digital divide, whereby school students who do not have access to technology and internet at home, were unable to fully participate in online education. There are ongoing concerns that there may be students, especially those from more vulnerable families, who are left behind in terms of their education and learning.
- There are many seniors within our community who do not have access to technology and internet to connect with important and up to date information and services. Further, many do not have the digital skills to interact effectively online, which generates a range of social and health related risks.
- There are concerns of a digital divide for members of our culturally and linguistically diverse community. Although some may have access to technology, they can lack the support required to understand and interpret information due to language or system barriers.
- A number of vulnerable sections of the community are unable to access important online information, and there is an increasing risk that they will fall through the gaps.

During the initial stages of COVID-19 and the first major lockdown, as a result of people being socially isolated and unable to access support services via their usual means, this resulted in an increased need for emergency relief support, particularly access to food, hygiene, medicine and financial support. In reality, COVID-19 shone a spotlight on challenges that some sections of our community deal with every day. During this period short term solutions were identified and delivered by all levels of Government. This demonstrated that there is the capacity to address these sorts of challenges in a sustainable manner.

Initiatives Addressing Social Isolation and Loneliness

Provided below is a summary of some of the initiatives that Council has been involved in that respond to social isolation and loneliness. This is not a finite list, and you will see that it includes a broad range of initiatives that largely focus on bringing people together or are focused on positive mental health solutions, because as previously mentioned, social isolation and loneliness are linked to a range of other social challenges that exist in community, and it is important to focus on these broader strengths based solutions.

Community Infrastructure Strategy – we know that critical community infrastructure such as Libraries are the key to bringing people together. In 2019, Logan City Council endorsed the Community Infrastructure Strategy 2019-2041, and the vision endorsed as part of this Strategy outlines that "the City of Logan has a modern network of community infrastructure that meets the social, cultural, educational, recreational and sporting needs of our diverse population. These places are recognised by the community as a focal point for people to connect, belong and thrive."

Following on from the endorsement of this Strategy, in the 2021/2022 budget process Council endorsed a recurrent program of funding to deliver community infrastructure across the City, to assist in delivering this vision. This funding includes $3 million in 2021/2022 and then $20 million per year thereafter to construct and operate these facilities that bring the community together.

One of the innovative initiatives linked to the above that is currently being implemented in partnership with the State Government, is the outcomes-based approach to the delivery and operation of the Yarrabilba Community Hub. In the early stages of planning for the delivery of this facility it was realised that there was an opportunity to better understand the social needs of the community and build

outcomes relating to these needs into the planning, construction and governance models associated with this facility. As a result of this, the themes of 'earning, learning, connecting and innovating' have been embedded into all the work being done relating to this facility. Once completed, the operator who manages this facility will equally be responsible for making sure that outcomes are being delivered that are linked to this vision. This is one example of an innovative project Council is delivering in the community infrastructure space to ensure the social needs of the community, such as social connection, are being addressed.

Programs and Activities

There is a long list of successful initiatives being delivered across Council, that can be used as examples of working with community on place-based initiatives that are focused on social connection and proactively delivering activities that improve the physical and mental wellbeing of people. As you will see, not all programs are directly about social isolation or loneliness, but the benefits of these programs are linked to this. Provided below is a summary of some of the major initiatives.

Mental and Physical Health:

- Live Well Logan and KRANK are important community programs that Council funds the delivery of each year. These programs are focused on providing affordable activities for the community to participate in that are also active and healthy. Like similar programs in the Libraries when there have been major lockdowns across the City because of COVID-19 these programs have been moved online. Ultimately these programs are best delivered in person, but either way, they present an excellent opportunity for the community to connect and meet new people.
- Hopeful Mindset's project is a collaborative between The BlackButterfly Group, The Solitude Project and Council that seeks to encourage people to take action around their mental health and the collective mental health of their families and the local community. The project includes monthly lighthouse conversations, mentoring, community 'hope runs' and the launch of a 'Hope Wall' mural to be created by the community.
- The Stories from the Kitchen project is designed to deliver a series of community dinners across the City where people from diverse cultural backgrounds can share food and stories with one another. Through funding support the project will also include the training of volunteers to facilitate the dinners and develop a young person to coordinate the dinners.
- Help Seniors Stay Connected was an initiative that the Community Development team delivered in collaboration with the Logan Seniors Network. The initiative includes the Logan Phone Buddy program, Home Instead Pen Pal program, the Home Instead Postcard initiative, the Friendline Support service, and the Community Visitors Scheme service. These are all initiatives designed to connect our local seniors.
- The Weekly Walking Counselling Service was an initiative developed in partnership between Griffith University and the Council to get people active and healthy and to also connect them with a counselling service to assist with mental health conversations.
- Postcards from the Heart was an initiative implemented during the initial COVID-19 lockdown as a means for people across the community to share something positive on a postcard, with the aim of connecting and providing support to others. All the postcards were subsequently displayed at the Logan Central Library.
- Wonderful Me is a self-guided journal targeted towards 9 to 12-year old's. It was developed as a creative way for young people to explore more about themselves and it includes a range of strengths-based tools to support young people.

As mentioned, the above are just a sample of the sorts of initiatives Council supports or facilitates to provide opportunities to support mental health. Key themes across all of them are that they are developed collaboratively with the community, they are local, place-based initiatives and they are focused on being community driven and connecting people with each other and where appropriate, relevant services.

Domestic and Family Violence (DFV):

- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities (CALD) DFV Resources – Council have developed DFV educational resources specifically designed for CALD communities. These resources consist of a DFV safety plan as well as explaining what DFV looks like and how to report and seek assistance. These have been developed in partnership with QPS, Access Community Services, Multilink, the Islamic Women's Association of Australia (IWAA), and members of the Not Now, Not Ever in Logan Reference Group. These resources have been translated into 5 languages – Swahili, Samoan, Farsi, Arabic and Hindi, which were identified in consultation with our partners. These resources have been strategically distributed to 99 Steps, Multilink, QPS and IWAA for their use. These are resources for individuals to use, but in relation to social isolation and loneliness they provide people with opportunities to connect.

- MATE Cultural Change Workshop – as a result of community concerns regarding high incidents of DFV within a particular location in the City, the MATE Cultural Change Workshop was facilitated by Griffith University. This initiative was undertaken in partnership with a community stakeholder organisation and Griffith University. This workshop was aimed at creating safer communities through education and training on being an active bystander. This training provides participants with a suite of tools they can apply to any situation (racism, discrimination, sexual harassment, violence) to address the behaviour respectfully and safely. This training is unique in that it is not aimed at the victim or the perpetrator but rather at all individuals who may witness disrespectful behaviour.

- Not Now, Not Ever in Logan domestic violence campaign - Council continues to support and remain a member of the Not Now, Not Ever in Logan reference group. The Not Now, Not Ever in Logan campaign is a community-based initiative, which aims to reduce DFV in the City of Logan. This group emphasises the importance of working together collaboratively with a place-based approach for the greatest chances of success.

- Donation of Live Life Alarms – in late 2020, discussions were held with the Centre for Women and Co. as well as 99 Steps on the type of meaningful support Council could provide to victims of DFV. As a result of these discussions, 15 personal alarms were purchased, 10 of which were donated to the Centre for Women and Co. and 5 to 99 Steps. The mobile alarms are an SOS alarm that work wherever there is 3G mobile coverage. When activated, the pendant sends 5 help messages, which also contain a link to Google Maps showing the wearer's location. It then calls up to 5 emergency contacts. When answered, the wearer can talk hands free through the pendant. Triple zero can be included as one of the contacts. This is a good example of people being able to stay socially connected through the use of technology even when in socially isolated situations.

- DFV Vigil – Council in partnership with the Centre for Women and Co. and YFS hosted a candle lighting vigil in May 2021 to remember the victims of DFV and to acknowledge the impact felt by their families and loved ones. The vigil was held as part of Queensland's DFV Prevention Month. This month aims to raise awareness of DFV and to send a clear message that DFV in families and homes will not be tolerated. It also sent a clear message to victims of DFV that they are not alone.

Grant funding:

Following is a summary of some initiatives Council has supported through community grants. This demonstrates the important role Council and government in general can play in providing seed funding for community driven initiatives.

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- Ethni Conversations (October 2020) – this initiative is through Ethni Inc, and it is a mental health and wellbeing program designed by and for young women from CALD backgrounds. The aim is to create safe, social space for young women where they can connect with like-minded peers, talk about the challenges they face and be equipped with tools to help them navigate life.

- Hopeful Mindsets (July 2021) – this initiative is through Tumanako Toa Inc, and it is a project that aims to connect with everyday people, utilising the principles of hope theory and empowerment strategy. The project will facilitate hopeful mindsets within people and inspire positive action in their life.

- Men's Shed Mental Health and Wellbeing (Jan-May 2021) – this initiative is through the Logan City Community Men's Shed, with the increased demand in mental health issues and isolation experienced by older men since the start of COVID-19 further support within the group is needed. Members will be trained in Mental Health First Aid to better support each other when they meet and share stories at the Shed. Feedback from the program includes, "The increase in camaraderie between the participants and the greater involvement with the other members at the shed. It has become obvious that we are more receptive to the needs of others at the shed."

- Community Connection with Women (Jul 2021-current) – this initiative is through 4 Voices Global Limited and is aimed at assisting women with DFV backgrounds to connect with their families. They have an off the grid van that provides digital/technology for free as well as a space to chat and have tea with other women and volunteers. Feedback from the program includes, "We received extraordinary thanks from the Logan community. Being able to help people connect with loved ones and others using our technology Providing free phones to people who otherwise could not have afforded them."

- Bridging the Digital Divide (Sept-Nov 2020) – this initiative is through Substation 33, and is an initiative designed to provide computers to the community as a result of the disconnect generated through COVID-19.

- The Experiences of Future Past (Dec 2020-current) – this initiative is through Hurricane Stars Club Inc and is about creating a visual online record of the human experience during COVID-19, to share and create connections with people in other similar situations.

As mentioned, the above outlines some initiatives happening across the community, and the key theme relating to each of these initiatives is that they are community led and place-based, and the role of Council is not to lead but provide some seed funding to help get these important initiatives off the ground.

Library Programs:

As mentioned throughout this report, the libraries across the City are critical infrastructure that support people coming together for all sorts of different programs and activities. This in turn has a positive impact on addressing social isolation and loneliness, as well as a range of other social benefits.

Some of the programs delivered through the libraries include:

- Home Learning Hub – library staff are available to support families and students with their learning needs through a range of online resources, personalised help and reading ideas. Studiosity is a free online tutoring service for students from years 3 to 12 who are members of the library.

- Page Turners – is a reading program that aims to grow the love of reading for children and young adults. Library staff or volunteers listen to children read and offer a one-on-one personalised service.

- First Five Forever program – is about improving the outcomes for all children aged 0 to 5 by supporting confidence and learning through everyday experiences.

- Hive Central and Hive West – are co-working spaces in two of our libraries, designed for use by small business owners, independent professionals and people starting out in business. The spaces can support meetings, working, networking, the sharing of ideas and improved opportunities for people to work collaboratively.
- Home Library Service – one of the options through this service is the opportunity for people to loan iPads that are preloaded with free eBooks and/or eAudiobooks.
- Technology support – library staff are available to provide one-on-one in person sessions to support people work through different technology challenges.
- Our libraries also provide a mix of other sessions that are designed to build the capacity of people while at the same time bringing them together, some of these activities include budget-friendly meal planning, how to prepare a resume or cover letter, gardening tips, etc.

The above highlights just a sample of the sorts of services that our libraries can provide to support the community and bring them together at these important community hubs. In addition to this, it is important to highlight some important statistics from 2020/2021 about the connections our libraries have with community:

- 949,347 visitors to Council Libraries.
- 123,483 members.
- 2,137,903 library items loaned.
- 301,113 online library items loaned.
- 462,384 library website visits.
- 339,514 online catalogue visits.
- 15,052 people participating in programs.
- 10,318 take home packs for families.

Future Opportunities

Based on the above impacts and list of initiatives we know have a positive impact on addressing social isolation and loneliness, below is a summary of the key future opportunities. These opportunities are centred around two key strategies – **infrastructure for people to connect, and place-based program/service delivery**.

Infrastructure for people to connect

increased investment in the infrastructure that supports bringing people together, e.g. Libraries, Community Hubs and affordable and accessible telecommunications infrastructure.

Libraries and community hubs are often the first places people go when they are new to a community, and for people that are experiencing a range of challenges it is the programs that are delivered within these facilities that help them get the support they need and connect them to other people in the community. The importance of these facilities has never been more important than it is now, especially in the current environment of lockdowns and social isolation generated through other means.

Council has a proactive plan in place to deliver community infrastructure across the City where the need has been identified. Council has also endorsed a recurrent capital and operational budget to assist in delivering this plan. However, for this program to be successful it is reliant upon support from other levels of Government to provide funding to assist in delivering the infrastructure priorities.

Nothing can replace face-to-face connection when it comes to addressing social isolation and loneliness, but for many people in our community this is not always possible. For some of our seniors, people living with disability, socially isolated students and for people where mental health challenges prevent them from physically interacting with others, the only option they have is to connect online. One of the challenges we experienced during the initial COVID-19 lockdown was that not everyone had

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access to either the computer hardware or the data required to connect, and this wasn't about 'black spots', this was more about affordability. Some of the identified solutions relating to this include:

- Invest in long term solutions to bridge the digital divide and improve social and economic equality through:
  - Providing more affordable network services, devices and applications to those most in need through industry innovations and government subsidies and policy.
  - Offering hardship grants for students to purchase equipment or services that enable then to participate in online learning at home.
  - Delivering targeted programs to improve digital literacy beyond the traditional places like education institutions and libraries, to reach more community centres, homes and aged care facilities.
  - Provide information technology support and education for adults and seniors.
  - Provide digital information in diverse languages.
  - Resource culturally and linguistically diverse services that support their community's access to information.

Place-based program/service delivery

Increased investment in place-based programs and services that assist in bringing people together, like many of those outlined in this report. The focus on place-based is really important in this opportunity. Whole of system or whole of region programs add value, but every community has different needs. Therefore, it is really important to work with community to understand the unique needs of different locations, and then ensure that the service provider, whether it be Local Government or community organisations, are resourced appropriately to support the place-based delivery of these programs. Some of the priorities include:

- Coordinated, place-based responses – engage and partner with local service providers to develop innovative place-based models of service delivery. Programs that are unique and tailored to the specific needs of that community.
- Strengthen the capacity of the system – provide additional funding to strengthen the capacity of service providers to be able to proactively respond to the needs of people affected by mental health, social isolation, loneliness and all the other priorities outlined earlier in this report. Some of the flow on priorities include:
  - Engaging and partnering with local service providers to increase preventative support programs and activities.
  - Ensuring mental health and related services are accessible, affordable and targeted appropriately towards priority sections of the community, utilising messaging and language that the target audience can relate to.

ANY PREVIOUS COUNCIL DECISIONS

Nil.

FINANCIAL/RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Nil.

RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

The risk management implications are all linked to community risks. The risks of doing nothing, of not working proactively to address isolation and loneliness challenges are enormous. As outlined above, there are roles that all levels of Government can play to address this.

LEGAL/POLICY

Nil.

COMMUNITY AND OTHER CONSULTATION

Given the timeframe between when the letter was received from the Minister to when the submission needed to be made, there hasn't been any community consultation specific to this submission. However, the content of the submission is based on ongoing discussion and relationships with key service providers in the community that work in this space.

CONCLUSION

This Inquiry being facilitated by the State Government relating to social isolation and loneliness is a positive step towards having more meaningful conversations about the sorts of priorities that need to be supported in order to address these challenges. This report has outlined information about the impact of social isolation and loneliness, it has also referenced a range of positive initiatives Council is involved in designed to assist in addressing these challenges, and the report concludes by recommending some priority areas that need additional support.

REPORT PROPERTIES

Report Attachments

Number	Attachment Title
Attachment 1	
Attachment 2	
Attachment 3	

No attachments.

Report Authorisations

Authorisation	Officer Names and Titles
Report Authors	• Nick McGuire, Community Services Manager
Authorising Officers	• Katie Barton-Harvey, Director Community Services
Branch and Directorate	Community Services / Community Services