

**North Townsville Community Hub (NOTCH)**  
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18/08/2021

Dear Secretary,

**Re: Neighbourhood Centres and the Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation**

The North Townsville Community Hub is one of 140 Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCC's) around Queensland responding to loneliness and social isolation in our local communities. Neighbourhood Centres are place-based social infrastructure that foster connection, belonging, participation and inclusion. In our area, after two years of disaster impact from the Townsville floods followed by ongoing covid impact, this issue is more prevalent than ever.

Neighbourhood Centres welcome everyone, regardless of race, gender, sexuality, religion, age or social status and by their very nature build connections between individuals and organisations, particularly those who are isolated, vulnerable and disenfranchised.

Our centre offers many funded and unfunded programs to encourage people to engage in place-based activities. Currently we have secured funding to continue very important community development work that is addressing ongoing mental health and social isolation impact from recent disasters. Specifically, point in time programs running out of our small centre in Townsville's Northern Beaches are:

- Wellbeing Café: Monthly free cuppa chat for anyone needing connection.
- Power of She Notch Women's Circle: Mindfulness, empowerment and connection for women after hours.
- Playgroup on site weekly in three rural/remote communities: We connect families in rural areas to playgroup, which for many is the only social interaction their children have before starting school. These connections often result in referral and connection to other relevant programs and crisis/DV/housing/NDIS supports.
- Be Connected: Computer classes for over 50's. This program addresses the digital and social isolation of many seniors in our community by giving them face to face support to learn the basics they need to complete their business online.
- Internet Café: Our centre has free computer access for those who are digitally excluded.
- Emergency Relief: We connect approx. 400 clients per month to emergency supports. This often includes providing human connection to homeless, DV clients, those living with mental illness or without disability support. We fill the gaps for our entire community of approx. 45000 people. This program does not include a paid worker, yet this is some of the most important connecting work we do. For example, many clients present with suicidal ideations, requiring intense psychological first aid and triage.
- Seniors Group: The many isolated seniors in our area now come together for weekly gatherings and outings because of the seniors' group we started. They have developed their own transport service to

pick up others who can't drive anymore to ensure wider inclusion. Lack of transport creates social isolation in our regional area.

- **Craft Group:** An informal group who use our centre weekly to connect with others while completing their preferred craft activities.
- **Volunteering:** Our centre is fortunate to have the support of a 15 strong volunteer team, made up of mostly seniors and the unemployed. For nearly all these volunteers, our centre is their only point of social connection outside of their home.
- **School Holiday Programs:** Our community centre recognises the need for low-cost, place based, fun activities in our local families. As such we stretch our resources to offer an unfunded/unstaffed free school holiday program every school holidays. Last year this program connected 1059 local children with community engagement.
- **Second Bite/Woolworths Food Rescue:** We are connected to both our local supermarkets and gratefully distribute their surplus bread and fresh produce every day. This program helps between 800-1000 people in our community each month, with many using the collection as a point of social connection to have a chat with our team and each other. All are welcome to stop for a free tea/coffee to encourage more connection. Many access this program to further distribute to seniors in their street or rural beach communities, thus providing further points of connection to those who would otherwise go without human contact or nutritious food.
- **Orange Sky Laundry:** We are a weekly stop off point for this laundry service, whose volunteers providing washing for the homeless. Part of their program is to provide social connection while meeting client's basic survival needs.
- **Notch Disability Connect:** We have secured funding to address the overwhelming need for social connection in our local disabled residents-amplified by the impacts of covid lockdowns. This program will offer weekly gatherings and structured activities free and close to home for the many clients who would otherwise not interact with anyone but their carers. We are hoping to foster friendships and opportunities for fun engagement. Many are NDIS funded but the costs of accessing NDIS funding to engage their carer, travel costs and activity costs to travel to the city to join existing groups are prohibitive, so they just stay at home.
- **Mental Health Network:** We secured funding to fill the gap identified post-floods for place-based mental health supports. This umbrella program has attracted many other free counselling and wellness programs to co-locate, providing further inclusion opportunities in our area.
- **Tai Chi for Health:** Free Tai Chi classes for disability clients to encourage healthy movement and face to face connection. The group stops for a cuppa together after class to provide social connection for participants.
- **Disability Disaster Preparedness:** We are launching workshops and 1:1 consultations to help disability clients consider and plan for their disaster/evacuation needs and connect with relevant supports before the next disaster hits. Those who are socially isolated are less prepared and less resilient in disaster situations, as evidenced by recent disasters in Townsville.
- **Disaster Recovery Services:** We are the point for connection in our community. Following the 2019 Townsville Floods, our servicing rate connected many isolated families and residents to emotional support and empathy, before connecting them with practical supports to aid their recovery. The impact on our small centre has shifted permanently. We now service 17 times the volume of clients we used to before the floods-without any extra workers or permanent increase in base level funding. This work continued for two years and has now transformed into similar support for those affected by covid and the ensuing housing/homeless crisis now happening in Townsville. Many homeless families who are living in the free campsites across the Northern Beaches, use our centre as a point of connection to support, power, internet and shower facilities.

- Community centre facilities: So many in our community use our facilities, including our Op Shop as a point of community connection. Many carers for the elderly and disabled clients, bring their clients in regularly for community engagement, due to lack of organised activities in our area.

**Our centre is funded for just 1 FTE worker, yet we connect more than 18000 people per year with supports, info, programs and encourage them to connect with each other. This is critical social infrastructure in every community that desperately needs to be funded at a level appropriate the volume of work that needs to be done. Most of that work improves outcomes of social isolation for every cohort in our society.**

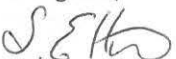
In considering how to reduce loneliness and social isolation in Queensland, the Queensland Government needs to adequately resource Neighbourhood Centres as the key pieces of social infrastructure they are.

Our centre supports the Queensland Families and Communities Association (QFCA) submission to this inquiry. QFCA is the peak body of Neighbourhood Centres in Queensland and recommend:

- **Increase Neighbourhood Centre Investment** to a minimum of 2.5 workers plus overheads per centre to ensure adequate resourcing of place-based pro-connection responses
- **Strength Based Awareness Campaign emphasising the key role of NCC's**, creating increased awareness of centres as hubs of connection for social isolated individuals
- **Enhance Neighbourhood Centre Digital and Physical Infrastructure** to connect isolated individuals in communities using hybrid online and in-person methods
- **Resource QFCA to deliver additional NCC sector support** including implementing an NCC Reporting Framework which measures social isolation and loneliness.

Additional resourcing by the Queensland Government can further enhance the Neighbourhood Centre sector's capacity to invest in community-led, place-based solutions to the problem of loneliness and social isolation in our state.

Kind regards,

  
**Sandra Elton**

Manager

North Townsville Community Hub Inc

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