



'Building Human & Social Capital'

Palm Beach Neighbourhood Centre's response to social isolation and loneliness

This document contains our response to the Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation, indexed items are as follows.

Content	Page no
Who we are and what we do	2
Who is coming to us	3
History and funding	4
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs	5
Barriers to social engagement	6
Let's include the homeless	7
The Great Digital Divide	8
Competing priorities	9
What we are already providing	10
What we can achieve with additional funding	11
What funded outcomes look like	12
Other types of interventions	14
Skilled Interventions are key	14
Summary	14
A Quiet word	15
A Case study	16

Who we are and what we do...

Palm Beach Neighbourhood Centre offers a place-based response to the southern Gold Coast. We have the skills and connections to offer social capital outcomes. However, within our current funding, our nominated projects are a direct reflection of the primary needs for the population here and our supports that are those that are not being duplicated elsewhere. We act as a safety net for community services through our 'NO WRONG DOOR' service model.



Additionally we hope that this report offers a deeper understanding of the activities, places and interactions that are valued by community members within our neighbourhood centre.

With any Inquiry, we must always seek to understand the cause of the problem before offering any band aid solutions. Is it the amount of people living by themselves? Is it lack of social outlets? Is it lack of awareness of social networks already available? Is it a response to lockdowns and lack of unity?

This is where community development methodologies come in, and potentially neighbourhood centres, acknowledging community assets and deficits and surveying individuals, asking simply *'what are the things that impede meaningful social interactions for you and how can we address those?'*

Community work is about consultation, co-design and collaboration.

Snapshot of who is coming to us...

As a neighbourhood centre, we are a soft-entry point. People often come to us for one particular issue, and during our conversation with them, we uncover other underlying issues, like how they really feel about their life, their sense of belonging, scope of their networks, and engagement or lack thereof, in the community. PBNC offers a psychological safe space, with non-judgmental staff to facilitate positive change and we are trusted by the community.

We have observed that persons who lack support networks within our area include:

- Recently separated men. These men have lost their family unit and purpose, and their self-esteem - *therefore we have "Dads in Distress" who meet here on a Tuesday.*
- Women escaping DV, (loss of all social networks and loss of self-esteem), *(transport and children are often barriers to participation in groups).*
- Women aged 55+ and not working (usually without superannuation and in a private rental; impoverished), occasionally we are able to offer a volunteering position (once or twice a year), *but we can discuss volunteering with them at other locations.*
- Men aged 55+ with mental health issues. (Impoverished and sometimes surrounded by drugs and alcohol). **There is scope to do more with these men and a community garden might be an option for us if we can raise funds to get one built.**
- Those with mental health issues/disabilities (don't necessarily connect to others who have a disability different from theirs). Again we could launch a community garden? Or seek funding to specifically conduct a survey and co-design a program with them?
- There are also those with no digital capacity (see the section on 'Digital Divide' below)
- Plus new migrants from culturally diverse backgrounds (see section on "Neighbours Connect" program below)
- And single women who work *and* have caring duties (no time for quality restorative connections and at risk of burnout or breakdown)

Additionally, each of these groups may have associated parallel issues such as experiencing severe grief and loss, working hours, transport issues or behavioural issues.

It is also important to acknowledge what is working well on the southern Gold Coast;



LGBTIAQ+ support services
Senior centres such as 60's and Better
Universal Design Council libraries and associated recreational rooms for hire
Outdoor Active and Healthy Free/ Low Cost exercise programs
Council maintained parks, skate parks and playgrounds
Church based playgroups
Carers Support Services

History is important...

Prior to 2013, Palm Beach Neighbourhood Centre received an extra 10% income which we used to address loneliness and social isolation. We had the 'Women of Worth' Support Group - an arts and craft therapeutic group used to build self-esteem through expressive activities and encourage social interaction. We also had an inclusive Playgroup for mums from marginalised backgrounds, including those with disabilities and victims of DV. In addition, we had a lot of personal development classes and morning and afternoon teas open to the community. However, in January 2013, we lost 25k under an 'Efficiency cut', and so these activities disappeared. We have never fully recovered from this....

The harsh reality of making tough choices on limited funding...

We recognise that there is a need for more social connection within the community, particularly in the form of interest groups. We have staff who can empower and help those to reach out and/or mentor.

However, since the cuts in 2013, our resources/projects have been invested in supporting persons with physiological needs and safety needs, such as income, housing, food and navigating services and accessing advocacy. Our centre believes that physiological and safety needs must be addressed as a Duty of Care and therefore must be addressed first (based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



A deficit in physiological and safety needs, results in poor mental health and reluctance to engage socially. Lack of stability leads to people living in a state of crises, lurching from one crisis to another, across income, family, drugs and alcohol, relationship and family changes. Stability and self-efficacy is what they are seeking. Many live below or around the poverty line, which triggers domino-like crises in their lives.

These people often feel shame, it's a fall from grace for many, and they can be shuffled within Departments and amongst services.

One person said they 'felt left to die'

Barriers to social engagement

Lack of affordable accommodation leads to many clients considering their tenancy in private rentals as transitional due to being financially unsustainable. Therefore, they tend not to seek connections until they feel stable (in case they can't stay where they are and held in a crisis state). Many of these people have a significant amount of their income going towards housing and food.

Financial needs. There is a rapidly increasing number of people who are experiencing financial instability. For example, single women without Superannuation, who are reliant on income support, and this will increase in the ageing population.

Our school backpacks have been a response to the governments cutting of the "Back to School" annual supplement. We have to rely on donations to provide these backpacks which gets tougher every year.

The **number of people in debt** is also on the rise, as people are struggling to pay for utilities. With financial instability comes loss of confidence to engage with others in the community. There is a lot of shame in living on the poverty line, **and the inability to keep up with the cost of living is also a factor that inhibits social participation.**

Safety needs. The prevalence of domestic violence cases and family breakdowns add to the increasing unmet needs of people who seek safety and a sense of security for their person and their family. Clients who experience these require very skilled responses from the Centre.

Other support needs. People with disabilities (both diagnosed and undiagnosed) struggle to access other services. Some people with a disability don't necessarily engage with other persons who have a disability that is different from theirs. They seek understanding at their own level. Additionally they can have low literacy skills, and thus have difficulty understanding and filling in forms and possess low confidence in accessing services.

Let's include the Homeless..

Understanding Homelessness & Loneliness and Social Isolation

- The homeless often have small and fractured social networks that do not meet their needs.
- Little is known about how the homeless' social experiences contribute to or protect them from loneliness and how they adapt/respond to these circumstances.
- Knowing how the homeless experience social networks will help services support them to successfully exit homelessness and maintain well-being. However we do know that
- The homeless experience rejection from mainstream society and a lack of relationships with valued pre-homeless connections.
- They have homeless networks, but these relationships can be too superficial or brief to fulfil their needs.
- Mainstream stigma around homelessness must shift to reduce loneliness.

SOURCE: Australian homeless persons' experiences of social connectedness, isolation and loneliness (2020)

Two subthemes of homelessness-

Rejection from Family –

Relationship breakdown precipitated homelessness

A research participant positioned loneliness as an almost-inalienable consequence of becoming homeless, associating it with rejection by traditional supports, like parents. Several participants described familial rejection occurring after homelessness. With one participant, this rejection persisted even after he exited homelessness

A Lack of Companionship - Some participants positioned their homeless social world as a lack of companionship, resulting from a paucity of close relationships. Many described being unable to “fit in” or find like-minded friends within the homeless community.

Others lost intimate partners prior to homelessness, being unable to find replacement relationships due to circumstances of their homeless situation and socio economic backgrounds.

Information needs and the ‘Great Digital Divide’

With much information on welfare and basic services going online, and with the rising costs of having smartphones and Wi-Fi, an increasing number of people are losing their connection to basic information and changes. Face-to-face interactions with service providers, like banks, are no longer easily available, where it would have given people more opportunity to ask questions without fear of making mistakes. People who are not confident with digital technology often lose confidence about their ability to access services altogether.

The Digital Divide affects many people out of the workforce; those with inadequate income for data plans and smartphones, those who suffer from digital anxiety through a lack of confidence and experience, those who are challenged in navigating complex government websites and who have a fear of getting things wrong, and those lacking digital proficiency, such as attaching files to an email etc. The divide also marginalises vulnerable Australians who may be exposed to scams, such as romance scams among the elderly, etc.

At PBNC we offer, one-on-one appointments to address basic digital literacy skills, but this is delivered by the same part time worker who runs the foodbank and wears other hats around the place.

Digital connection should always be a choice, as it is not as comprehensive as face-to-face support. But it's a choice that should be available and included in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs along with Safety needs, as the government transitions many of its income information, forms and support online.

Neighbourhood Centres can be a digital transition space offering W-Fi and teaching Skills

Competing Priorities, what people are wanting from us right now

- *face to face support, due to services going online*
- *help to navigate the internet*
- *material aid- e.g. school backpacks, blankets, toiletries and food*
- *help with understanding forms*
- *help with managing debt*
- *don't know where else to go*
- *help with Wi-Fi or computer access*

Basic Needs Must Come First

Neighbourhood Centres act as a safety net in the community and offer the no wrong door service model, which means over time we have evolved to fill the cracks in the community, this also means helping people transition and adapt in an increasingly complex world.

Therefore new additional activities should receive additional funding as we are consumed by helping vulnerable people keep up with a rapidly changing society; helping people to keep up with fulfilling their most basic needs to survive.

While PBNC currently addresses basic needs through our frontline support, we believe we are equipped and capable of addressing the higher-level needs, as can be seen from our pre-2013 programs that included a regular support group for women, a playgroup for those living in the margins, personal development sessions, and regular morning/afternoon teas. However, there are currently insufficient funds to reinstate social activities that were conducted prior to 2013.

What we are already providing in the Social Capital Space...

Volunteering as an option

Volunteering has so many benefits and offers one solution to address social isolation. PBNC has the capacity to offer one or two volunteer positions a year, as this is limited to the Coordinator's capacity to carry the additional workload that comes with managing volunteers: recruitment, Blue Card requirements, inductions, training, and ongoing supervision. Volunteers are also less reliable in permanent roles, as they often have reasons as to why they are not able to participate in the workforce part time or full time and so more frequent absences occur and programs experience the flow-on results of that.

Recently when asked about engaging a Care Army, I simply replied, "We would need a dedicated paid volunteer coordinator who could then engage a group or several groups of volunteers, as I do not have capacity, already wearing at least five hats around the place. There is no down time here and we run at a hectic pace".

Current volunteer hours are approximately 70 per week, equal to staffing levels.

We hold infrastructure for a Community Hub

We do not offer social groups anymore for reasons mentioned above and/or funding constraints. However, there are some social outcomes linked to our existing activities.

- As a hub, we offer a space for "Dads in Distress" and Auslan Sign Language classes.
- Our staff are available to offer financial literacy classes, (community education).
- As a Coordinator, I can offer student placement and some limited volunteering opportunities per year.

External Events that Raise Awareness

We also hold external events across the year raising awareness about certain issues (when Queensland Health permits), to commemorate local and state events, such as: Child Protection Week, White Ribbon, Harmony Day, International Women's Day, and similar events. Through these, we are able to engage approximately another 150 people per year across the community.



We know that given additional funding we can achieve great outcomes

*Through our connectedness with the community, our Centre has **potential**, (given additional funding), to increase safe, collaborative and interactive activities that can promote social interactions amongst our participants.*

Benchmarking for funding is an additional \$85,000 offers three days a week of social outcomes.

How do we know this?

Most recently through a DSS grant that we received due to expire June 2022

The PBNC's Neighbour Connect program has been in effect since 2018 and addresses a multitude of challenges, including social isolation and loneliness, faced by the CALD community in the local area. The Neighbourhood Centre has facilitated connections with people from more than 40 different ethnic

backgrounds and nationalities through the service. The program engages participants, local supporters and volunteers, and is carried out through English language classes and client-led community engagement events. The events encourage members to share their experiences, skills and local knowledge with each other.

During COVID, the project continued using Zoom, which was received well and ultimately cultivated participant engagement. The isolation experience, exacerbated by other vulnerability factors, fostered a close connection between the members, as was noted in increased interactions and modes of communication. For example, the participants created a group on the LINE app where they could share information, news and check up on each other.

Feedback from participants demonstrates that since the commencement of the program, social capital outcomes include:

- Significant involvement in volunteering in the community as well as feeding into other community organisations and the educational sector.
- Increased language proficiency (community education) resulting from English-language classes.
- The classes also assisted in overcoming barriers to inclusion, such as hesitancy and lack of confidence in communication, which frequently contributes to isolation issues experienced by CALD populations.
- The participants' consensus was that they had been provided with increased self-confidence and were more comfortable expressing themselves in new situations. Some quotes from the participants include:

"At PBNC I feel comfortable to speak and I'm relaxed and not afraid to make a mistake".

"You don't realise how much you learn. Somethings that used to be hard for me, for example talking to teachers and understanding handouts from my daughters' school, now seems easy".

"This class have given me confidence to talk in English with other people I don't know".

"It is good because we learn a lot about Aussie culture, practical skills and customs not just grammar".

"The program helped improve all parts of my English and has given me confidence talking to Australian people.

- Engagement and participation in community activities, such as sporting groups, cooking classes and further educational ventures. For example, the centre has advocated for several students on selected visas to access additional educational services.
- Reciprocity. The group organised within themselves a bi-monthly workshop where they share their skills and local knowledge. They also invite other people from the area to increase networking opportunities and local connections.
- Sense of belonging, as seen in the increased physical contact and affection shared between participants and how they talk about each other and share their lives. One of the program volunteers noted:

"Close connections and real friendships are being formed and they are being social with each other outside of the facilitated group meetings. They are even building intimate relationships and share holidays together".

And some of the participants said:

"This class is really like family. We were really looking forward to meeting again after the lockdown".

"We are a big group of friends that visit each other's houses and have parties together. More and more people have joined".

"If I start talking about how much I love this group and these people, I will never stop talking".

Additional funding is also needed to address..

Evidence Source; Infrastructure for social connection: researching the existing assets for creating social connectedness and identifying interventions (Victoria, Australia, November 2020) <https://apo.org.au/node/309682>

- The costs associated with a high reliance on volunteers within the neighbourhood centre infrastructure. **Additional funding that supports the workload associated with recruiting and retaining volunteers.**
- **ADEQUATE funding** across and within community assets and groups, including skilled interventions, resourced spaces, record keeping, compliance and safety, activity planning, delivery and promotions, facilitating co-design and evaluation.

- Upon receipt of adequate funding, we can enhance Collaboration and Connection Across and Between Diverse Groups: Activities that link 'community resource chains' (e.g. where the boxes for a community garden are built, designed or decorated by other community craft or arts groups) and can be utilised by different target group and across differing target groups. Multi-purpose spaces for diverse groups.

Other types of interventions that can be considered

- befriending schemes (often delivered by volunteers),
- one-to-one and group therapies to address relationship difficulties,
- shared activity programs (e.g. adult learning etc.)

Skilled interventions by trained workers are key...

Of these listed interventions, it appears that the only strategies that have demonstrated effectiveness are those that facilitate engagement in meaningful, satisfying group activities, and psychological interventions to address the maladaptive cognitions associated with loneliness.

(Masi C, Chen HY, Hawkley LC, Cacioppo JT. A meta- analysis of interventions to reduce loneliness Pers Soc Psychol Rev. 2011;15(3):219–66.)

In Summary... the Palm Beach Neighbourhood Centre is addressing all possible areas of need by our community. We are well-placed to address loneliness and social isolation within our community, but are under-resourced to do this adequately. We require additional funding to enhance and support the existing services we are already delivering.

While the factors that our centre has observed to cause loneliness and social isolation in our community are multilayered and complicated, we continue to address our clients' needs in the most holistic manner despite our limited resources. This means that, as we continue to address the most basic of needs, we also strive to provide support that promote each client's wellbeing, through community outreach and consistent communication and collaboration with various government and non-government service providers.

A quiet word about Public Health Measures, loneliness and social isolation...

Social distancing is difficult, and perhaps the term 'physical distancing' should have been used instead. Lockdowns are even harder on mental health. New and ever increasing restrictions on work, travel and families are terrifying to many.

Mental health and requests for psychology appointments has increased significantly in the last year. We have now THREE independent Resident psychologists co-located in the building with us.

PBNC staff (not psychologists) are encountering people with intent to suicide weekly. Prior to lockdowns, it was 1 person every 3 months who required an intervention, this now occurs weekly.

Parents who are home-schooling children with behavioural disorders are now ringing us distressed and feeling isolated.

Loss of income for the culturally diverse community has been significant and caused us to launch a foodbank last year, fortunately we have our social capacity building DSS program.

Our staffing has also been affected with changing definitions of Essential Workers at the QLD/ NSW border to support people. With the two main staff residing in NSW and unable to meet the definition of Essential Worker as enforced by QPS recently and therefore turning down clients.

The transient homeless community can't access our foodbank when trapped over the other side of the border. At the southern end of the Gold Coast, families and workplaces are being divided as Queensland and New South Wales are segregated. This is occurring during an Inquiry into loneliness and social isolation.

One final case study of a client citing loneliness who contacted our centre.

31.5.21

"P.V."

P.V., a single 50 year old man, was referred to Palm Beach Neighbourhood Centre by the local Centrelink office to discuss housing options.

PV arrived early for his appointment, he was showing signs of distress and was immediately assured that he was in a safe and supporting place. He advised that he has had housing issues over some time and was presently staying at the local Palm Beach Hotel accommodation. He had only enough money to pay for tonight and then he would be homeless for the first time in his life. PV advised that he has depression and anxiety which was being augmented by his feelings of loneliness, social isolation and the thought of now being homeless was 'too much for him'.

I advised PV that unfortunately, we are not a housing service but I could certainly give him information on the local housing services; Homelessness Hub, Wesley Mission and Department of Housing. I attempted to call the Homelessness Hub as I had encouraged PV to go down there afterwards to meet with the staff. As the call was not answered, I had left PV's number on the message for a call back from the Homelessness Hub. .

Whilst we discussed housing options, PV started showing further signs of anxiety and said that he didn't think he would feel safe by himself tonight. He began getting emotionally upset and stated that he thought he might need to admit himself into hospital. I asked if he had done this before and he answered 'No, this is the first time as he has been bottling up his emotions for too long and today it has become too much for him'. I went to my supervisor for guidance and a call was made for the ambulance to come. PV was grateful for this support as having no friends or family on the Gold Coast the isolation and loneliness was intensifying his emotional state of mind. During the 1.40min wait for the ambulance I sat supporting PV. There were times he was overcome with grief and was uncontrollably shaking, whilst I remained by his side giving him the support he needed.

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Palm Beach Neighbourhood Centre

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