Social isolation and loneliness in Queensland

Inquiry submission August 2021
Community Services Industry Alliance

1.

Community Services Industry Alliance

Submission structure

Section one tells you about the Community Services Industry Alliance.

In section two, we have defined social isolation and loneliness based on the research and drawn out the drivers and protective factors. The sections that follow rely on this evidence as the basis of our framing of solutions and recommendations.

Section three sets out our proposed concept for a statewide strategy and how it could leverage existing assets across the Queensland government.

Our submission focuses heavily on responding to items five and six of the terms of reference, based on our interest and expertise in systems change, investment reform and the value of a partnership approach between the community services industry and the Queensland Government to achieve our big goal of a just and equitable society.

We have collaborated with Volunteering Queensland and Neighborhood Centres Queensland in the development of this submission. We support the research and recommendations in their submissions as experts in their respective fields and commend those submissions to you. We have relied upon this expertise in the development of our own submission.

About us

The Community Services Industry Alliance (CSIA) was established to advance the business and sustainability of community services to make a bigger difference to people's lives. CSIA's broad goal is to contribute to a more just and equitable Australian society. Our stakeholders are small, medium and large organisations across Australia delivering services across disability, aged care, early childhood, housing, community health, veterans services, youth services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community services. Our mandate is to help community organisations to be the best they can be in order to contribute to a just and equitable society. Social and economic inclusion is a key element of this broader goal.

Our strategic program of work includes:

- **Industry development** focused on the delivery of a range of activities designed to help organisations improve their business capability.

- **Improving outcomes** through demonstration projects designed to improve how public money is invested in human and social services to achieve the best outcomes.

- **Workforce planning** and development both industry wide and in specialised sub-sectors as outlined further below; and

- **Policy and influencing** work designed to improve he business environment in which organisations operate.

About us continued…

CSIA works with a wide range of local, state and federal government agencies and other bodies, including in the Queensland government:

- Department of Employment, Small Business and Training;

- Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy;

- Department of Children, Youth and Multicultural Affairs;

- Department of Seniors, Disability Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships;

- Queensland Family & Child Commission;

- Jobs Queensland.

CSIA also delivers work with and for the Commonwealth Department of Social Services; the National Disability Insurance Agency; Logan Together; Ernst & Young; Deloitte Access Economics; and several PHNs. CSIA has also delivered a range of projects with investment from the community services industry.

CSIA has recently developed a Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) and has an ongoing commitment to developing mutually beneficial relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities.

2.

Defining concepts, causes and drivers, and protective factors.

> One in four Australian adults experience loneliness. The oldest Australians (over 65 years) are the least lonely; there are no differences between other age categories in loneliness levels.
>
> *Australian Loneliness Report 2018*

Defining concepts

"Social isolation is seen as the state of having minimal contact with others. It differs from loneliness, which is a subjective state of negative feelings about having a lower level of social contact than desired (Peplau & Perlman 1982, cited by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). The two concepts do not necessarily co-exist—a person may be socially isolated but not lonely, or socially connected but feel lonely."

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare describes **social isolation and loneliness as harmful to both physical and mental health** with **wide ranging social and economic impacts**. Despite this experiences of social isolation and loneliness across our community remain poorly understand, measured and reported on.

(Australian Psychological Society 2018; Relationships Australia 2018 cited by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021).

Structural and social factors

Discrimination

The experience and impacts of social isolation and loneliness may increase as a result social stigma and discrimination arising from a **person's identity or culture**.

Disadvantage

The experience and impacts of social isolation and loneliess may increase as a result of **poor access to services** and supports including housing and health and access to a job.

Place

The experience and impacts of social isolation and loneliness may increase as a direct result of the place where a person lives and include the impacts of **remote locations** on relationships.

Impact of COVID-19

Mental health

The evidence shows that people who experience depression and other forms of mental health are more likely to experience social isolation and loneliness.

Australia has seen a **sharp rise in mental health issues** during the pandemic and many experts suggest that this will have long term ramifications, including increasing social isolation and loneliness.

Existing disadvantage

COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on already disadvantaged groups in our communities across dimensions of income, housing, employment and health.

Evidence suggests increased levels of disadvantage, particularly where they are multiple and complex, are **likely to compound social isolation and loneliness**.

Social distancing and lockdown

Social distancing rules and lockdown measures are likely to **impact people living alone disproportionately**, exacerbating loneliness.

Similarly, these measures can also isolate women and children from networks with negative consequences in abusive relationships.

Risk factors for social isolation and loneliness

Disconnection from community	Exclusion based on race, identity or disability	Unemployment and receiving income support, including general dissatisfaction with financial situation	An experience of depression and anxiety, particularly around social interactions
Living alone	Not being in a relationship	Relationship separation (more significant for men)	Single parenthood (more significant for women)

Cited in: (Flood 2005; Lauder et al. 2004; Relationships Australia 2011, Baker 2012, Australian Psychological Society 2018).
https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/social-isolation-and-loneliness

Protective factors for social isolation and loneliness

Community tolerance of difference and diversity

Cultural identity and connection

Employment and financial security

Sense of achievement, self worth and meaning

Family cohesion

Good interpersonal relationships

Social connectedness

Good health and well being

Digital inclusion

Housing security

Supporting Research

The Australian Loneliness Report: The Australian Psychological Society commissioned Swinburne University to publish the most comprehensive study of loneliness in Australia. The report focusses on the wellbeing of Australians and their experience of social isolation. https://psychweek.org.au/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Psychology-Week-2018-Australian-Loneliness-Report-1.pdf

All the Lonely People – Loneliness in Australia: The Australia Institute studied the long-term pattern of loneliness in Australia. The paper identifies the demographic characteristics and risk indicators associated with this experience. The paper concludes that loneliness in Australia is growing. This paper also looks at the impacts of social media and online interactions on people's loneliness. https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/IP9-All-the-lonely-people_4.pdf

Ending Loneliness Together in Australia: White Paper 2020. https://endingloneliness.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Ending-Loneliness-Together-in-Australia_Nov20.pdf

Mapping Loneliness in Australia: This paper uses national survey data to map patterns of loneliness in Australia, concluding who is the most at risk of loneliness and what creates social support. https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/DP76_8.pdf

Is Australia Experiencing an Epidemic of Loneliness?: Relationships Australia released a report exploring the findings from 16 waves of the Household Income and Labour Dynamics of Australia Survey. https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/DP76_8.pdf

Impacts of social isolation among disadvantaged and vulnerable groups during public health crises: As part of ESRC's response to the Covid19 pandemic, a review was commissioned to address the question: What is known about the impacts of social isolation on disadvantaged, marginalised, and vulnerable populations in the context of pandemics and other public health crises? https://esrc.ukri.org/files/news-events-and-publications/evidence-briefings/impacts-of-social-isolation-among-disadvantaged-and-vulnerable-groups-during-public-health-crises/

3.

Designing and implementing a Statewide strategy

Towards Social and Economic Inclusion for all Queenslanders

Responding to social isolation and loneliness will require clear policy objectives, reform of existing program and investment settings and a strong partnership with the community services industry.

Five key elements

Make it everyone's business – empower communities and build shared ownership of the issues associated with social isolation and loneliness.

Bring inclusion into sharp focus – strategic communication across the community to promote positive attitudes and tackle stigma and discrimination that contributes to social isolation and loneliness.

Highlight pathways to community connection – create opportunities for people to connect by telling stories and highlighting existing programs.

Invest in community infrastructure – focus on supporting person-centred approaches to support services, strengthening community organisations in their roles and facilitating access to digital infrastructure.

Recruit social inclusion champions – build leadership at a local level to break down the stigma of social isolation and loneliness and drive positive change.

Supporting examples

Tackling loneliness and social isolation during COVID

A Connected Scotland

Loneliness – A new public health challenge emerges

Social Recovery Beyond COVID 19 – A National Strategy to Address Loneliness and Social Isolation.

Monash Loneliness Framework

Three key opportunities

1) Develop a comprehensive strategic framework to draw together and focus effort

Strategic action to address social and economic isolation could be a key Queensland Government imperative.

A unifying policy framework would drive delivery and coordinate integration with other efforts across the government and the community.

This framework could draw together existing DCHDE programs and investment as well as the programs of other Queensland government agencies in relevant areas such as older people, women, mental health and employment.

The framework could have a dual approach of reducing risk factors and boosting protective factors.

A theory of change underpinning the framework would allow understanding of contribution (not attribution) of Queensland government effort and investment.

Measurement of progress could span population and place level and include both process and impact indicators.

Policy coordination would most effectively be driven by a single agency, such as DCHDE, with responsibilities for contributing agencies tied to a high level of departmental accountability and strong authorising environment, such as Ministerial charter letters and regular reporting to Parliament on progress.

Three key opportunities

2) Leverage existing investment and reform efforts

Many protective factors that prevent social isolation and loneliness are also protective or preventing factors for other social issues.

The intersecting nature of this is a key opportunity.

Asset based thinking could be applied to existing investment and hard and soft infrastructure to understand the investment ecosystem and map what assets can be leveraged to deliver the strategy.

Investment reform processes such as Commissioning for Outcomes (more) could consider the readiness of different areas of investment to reorganise or realign and to understand where new investment may be needed.

Investment within government as well as investment in services delivered externally by partners, such as the community services industry, could be in scope.

For example, existing DCHDE program areas could be points of leverage to respond to social isolation, including housing, financial inclusion, home care support, social cohesion, neighbourhood centres and homelessness services. Adjacent reform or actions areas in volunteering, housing and homelessness and neighbourhood centres represent further opportunity for leverage.

This same thinking could be applied across all agencies that deliver a service to people in Queensland.

The following two diagrams illustrate these connections across DCHDE, and across the broader Queensland government.

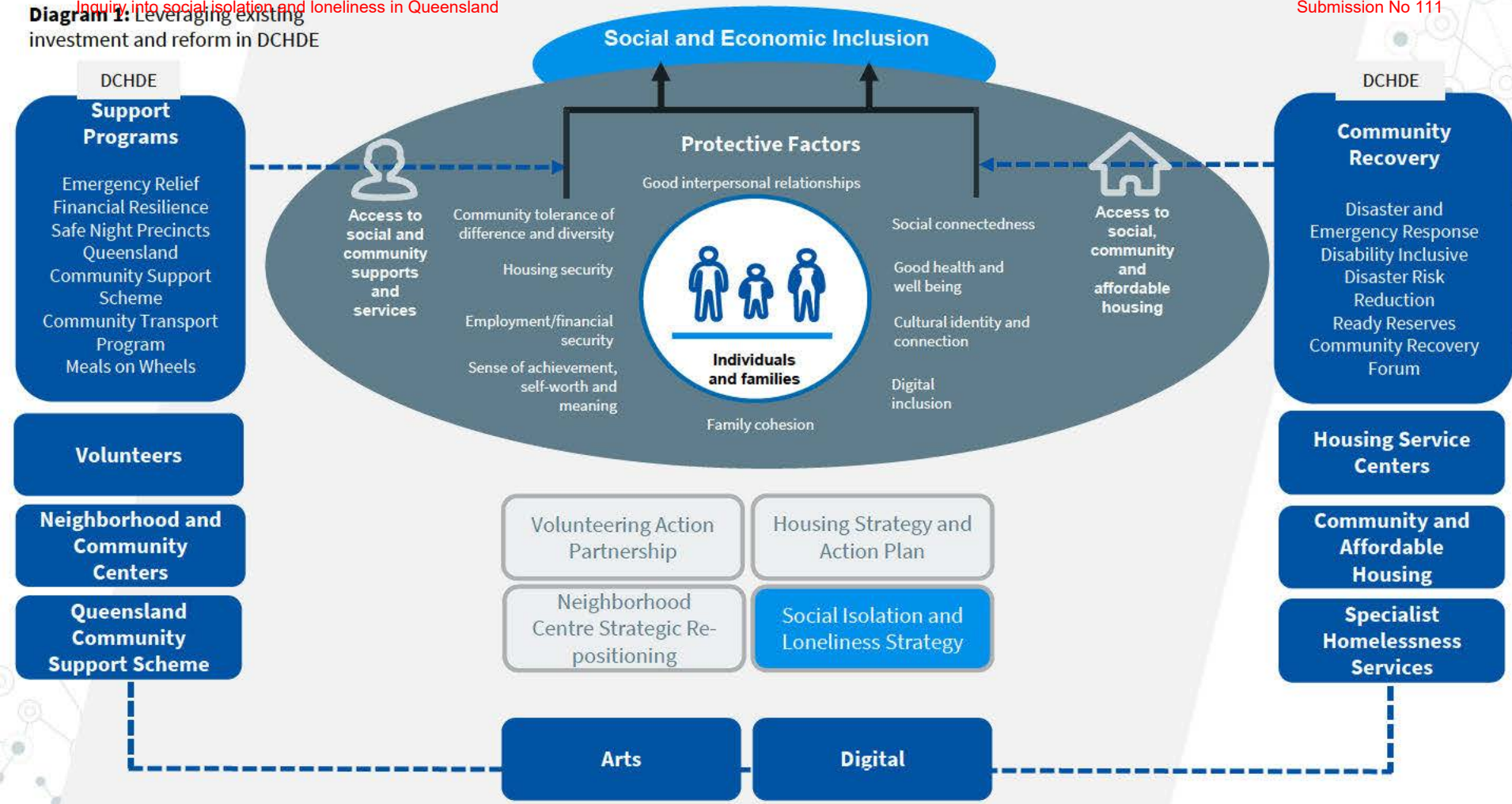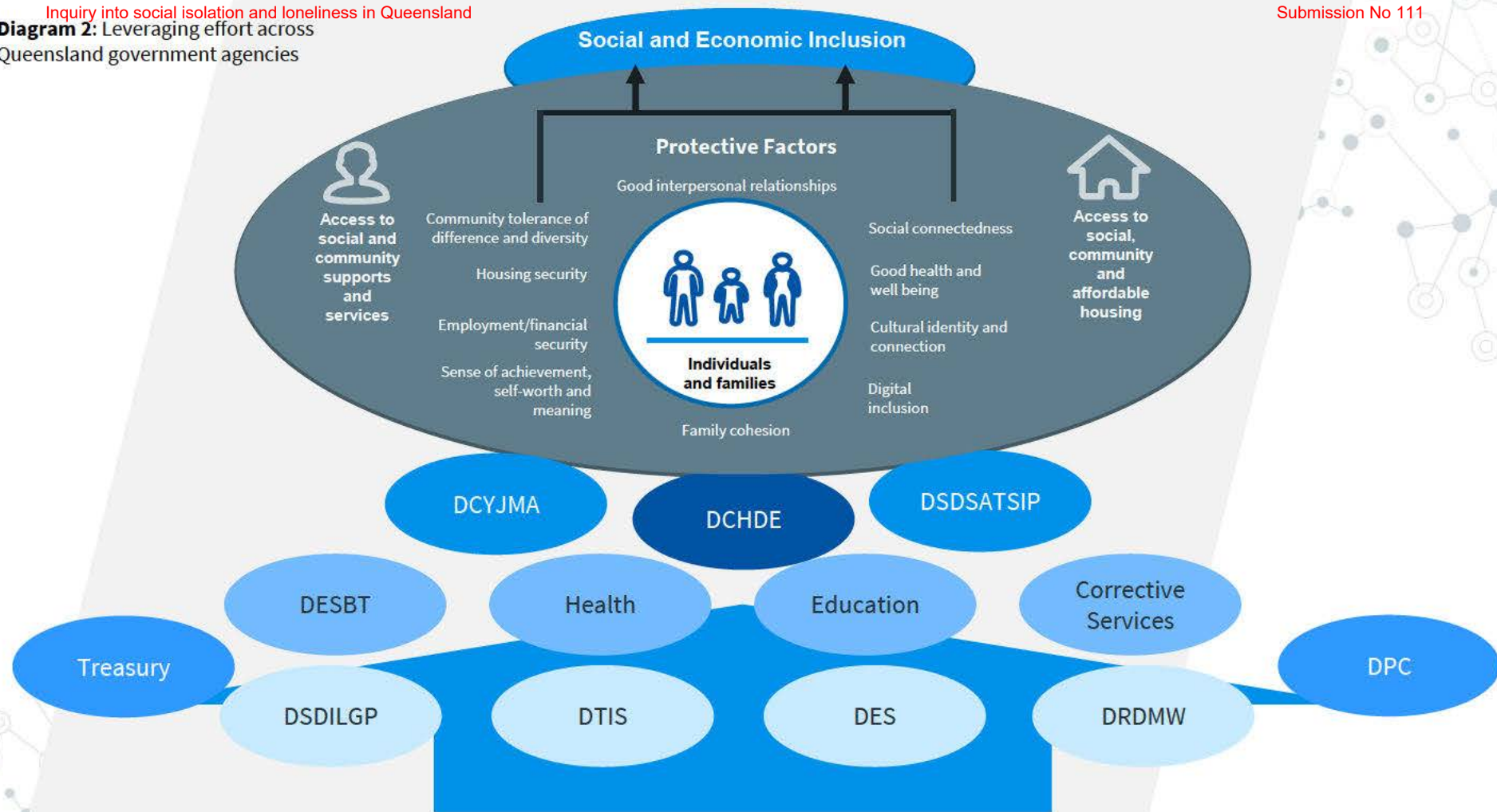**Diagram 1:** Leveraging existing investment and reform in DCHDE

Diagram 2: Leveraging effort across Queensland government agencies
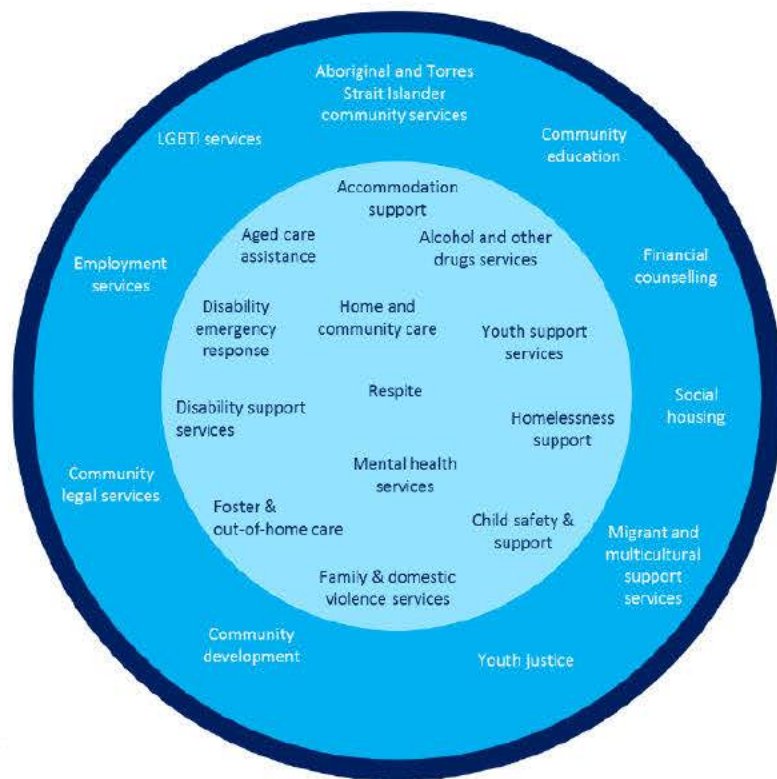
Three key opportunities

Diagram 3: The community services industry

3) Build on connections and our COVID experience

Community organisations represent a wide and vast network of relationships, networks and resources across Queensland: a significant set of community assets.

During the COVID-19 pandemic community organisations have proven themselves to be foundational across the community in responding to and preventing the impacts of the pandemic, including social isolation and loneliness.

These community assets can be valued and more intentionally utilised in the response to social isolation and loneliness.

We invite you to connect with the community services industry as a key partner in the design and delivery of a Queensland government response to social isolation and loneliness.

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We welcome further conversation and exploration of the content of our submission and can be contacted at:
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Inquiry Terms of Reference

1. 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

2. The causes and drivers of social isolation and loneliness, including those unique to Queensland

3. The protective factors known to mitigate social isolation and loneliness

4. 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

5. 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

6. The role, scope and priorities of a state-wide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness, considering interactions with existing Queensland and national strategies.

23