

18 August 2021



## BHC Submission

### Parliamentary Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness

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#### Contact Details

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**Endorsement:** *This submission is made on behalf of Brisbane Housing Company, with endorsement from CEO Rebecca Oelkers*

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To whom it may concern,

Through our work in affordable housing, BHC is acutely aware of the significant social isolation and loneliness experienced in the community, most notably by those who are disadvantaged or vulnerable. We have noticed an increase in this social isolation and loneliness since the outbreak of Covid-19. We believe there has been significant impact on people in the community, particularly those with pre-existing health conditions and limited support networks; including people who are elderly or from low socio-economic or vulnerable backgrounds.

#### Impact Reflected in the 2020 Tenant Satisfaction Survey

In BHC's 2020 Tenant Satisfaction Survey<sup>1</sup>, 43% of residents accessed community support in the last 12 months. This is an increase from the 33% in 2019, reflecting increased need for support. When asking the type of support accessed, 21% of people accessed mental health support and 9% accessed social activities. We have also seen a drop in the percentage of residents who engage in activities with fellow residents; from 30% (2019) to 23% (2020). Again, we believe Covid-19 to be the most notable cause for this, with residents previously engaging in more incidental and intentional socialising.

An example of this is as follows. Prior to Covid-19, Oz Harvest provided food drops at several BHC complexes. Due to the increased health and safety risks during the pandemic, residents no longer felt comfortable to have this service run, and it was stopped. Despite the service ceasing at the request and concern of residents, the impact of this has been significant.

One resident commented:

*"[I previously participated] In the food-drop... when it was functional. We would chat and get to know each other. It should begin again- as the sense of isolation/ and financial hardship is affecting residents negatively."*

Due to the pandemic, the food drop cannot be provided without significant staffing to implement Covid-safe practices, and as such this service has not been able to recommence.

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<sup>1</sup> Half of BHC's affordable housing portfolio surveyed each year with an 80% return rate achieved



### **Impact Reflected Anecdotally**

In addition to what residents said in the survey, perhaps the biggest indicator of the increased levels of social isolation and loneliness has been seen when speaking to residents directly. BHC staff follow up unreturned surveys by calling residents and asking them to complete the survey over the phone. Usually, this exercise would take approximately 15-30 minutes per phone call. This year when staff made those phone calls, they found them taking a significantly longer time, approximately 45-90 minutes. Staff completing these calls found residents were lonely and just wanted someone to talk to. This experience was not unique to the survey collection exercise. BHC staff have continued to experience this during conversations with residents, with some residents explicitly stating their feelings of isolation and loneliness having increased since the beginning of the pandemic.

Additionally, in June 2021 BHC and the Resident Community Development Team, a collective of BHC affordable housing residents seeking to positively contribute to the BHC community, held the first all resident event since the beginning of the pandemic. Knowing the BHC portfolio has a significant number of elderly residents and people with health issues, until now all large-scale events had been halted for safety reasons.

Pre-pandemic, events such as these would be attended by approximately 50-80 residents, however, due to increased levels of anxiety and unease, the recent event was only attended by approximately 30 residents. During this event residents were asked for their suggestions on what they would like to see in terms of community development and engagement over the coming year. Overwhelmingly the feedback was social events or activities to reconnect the community.

### **Potential Barriers**

BHC can unequivocally say that our residents have experienced increased levels of social isolation and loneliness, issues which were already significant prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Amongst other reasons, the reduction in accessible, covid-safe programs (including social and support programs) as well as increased levels of anxiety and personal unease has limited opportunities for connection and community.

Further to this, whilst we have seen many organisations pivot to online service delivery, we are also acutely aware of digital inclusion issues which exclude some of our residents from participating in this delivery model.

In 2019 as part of the annual BHC Tenant Survey, BHC surveyed a sample of residents to enquire about their digital inclusion access and appetite for these technologies. A summary of the findings from the 2019 Digital Inclusion Survey are as follows:

- 17% of tenants surveyed have not accessed the internet recently and a further 5% haven't accessed it for over 3 months, meaning one-fifth of our sample have no regular access to the internet.
- 20% of tenants suggested it wasn't necessary to have access to the internet and 25% thought it was 'nice to have'.



- 73% of respondents have their own smart phone and over 50% have their own computer, laptop, or tablet. 15% of the tenants sampled use public equipment, for example at a library.
- 15% of respondents use free Wi-Fi and 5% use internet or data belonging to someone else.
- Of those that don't use the internet- 32% do not want it or need it and those that do say cost of equipment (28%), or cost of data (28%) are the prohibiting factors.
- 33% of respondents who don't have access to the internet don't know how to use it and 3.5% need special equipment due to a disability.
- 42% of respondents find the internet expensive or unaffordable.
- 18% of respondents rate their level of confidence in using the internet as low or very low.

What these findings mean in the Covid-19 Pandemic:

- 22% of respondents advised they had no access to the internet this would have made the health crisis an incredibly challenging time, balancing this with social and physical distancing.
- With 15% of our sample utilising equipment and technologies at a public library, these residents would have felt isolated when public libraries closed and, once they were open, if the individual had health concerns which left them uncomfortable attending public venues.
- Education is required to assist 33% of respondents who do not have access to the internet to assist them with confidence and ability to connect.

It is worth noting that the Digital Inclusion Survey results were recorded prior to the COVID-19 health crisis and whilst respondents have suggested their requirement for internet is low, post the pandemic these results would likely be different. As people's lives have been so directly connected to the internet throughout the pandemic, having limited access to digital technologies would have been completely isolating for many.

From issues around data affordability and device ownership, to digital literacy and low confidence; simply put, the online service delivery method is not accessible to all. For many across our community, a lack of physical programs and engagement has meant further isolation and uncertainty about how and when they will be able to reconnect. Add to this varying levels of social anxiety, mental and physical health concerns and limited financial capacity and we have seen these issues further compounded.

### **BHC's Response**

A key element of BHC's Covid-19 response has been the establishment of ResidentConnect. This service acts to connect residents with relevant information and resources during the Covid-19 pandemic. This service has also provided a mechanism to gain understanding of the impacts of the pandemic on BHC residents. Whilst speaking with residents about their individual circumstances, ResidentConnect has heard first-hand some of the stress, isolation, anxiety, and loneliness experienced by residents.

Additionally, earlier in the pandemic (2020) BHC conducted a 'Covid Check-In' survey. The survey was sent via SMS for residents to complete online if they wished. Anecdotally we heard that this survey reassured many residents that they were not alone and, regardless of whether they completed the survey or not, the act of 'checking in' was appreciated by many.





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The resident event held in June 2021 was also specifically designed as a response to the social isolation and loneliness felt across the community. The Resident Community Development (RCD) Team had all experienced levels of social isolation and loneliness during the pandemic and had heard similar stories from their neighbours. Whilst the event had originally started as a celebration of a project the Team had completed (postponed from 2020 due to Covid), once planning began it quickly morphed into a 'community kickstart' of sorts. The RCD Team wanted to provide an opportunity for the BHC community to reconnect and come together in a safe and welcoming environment, whilst also incorporating opportunities to gain feedback and welcoming participation in the Team. The event had a relaxed and celebratory vibe, with many who attended expressing appreciation for the event as a way to reconnect.

Currently BHC, in partnership with Community, is running a twelve-week Art Therapy Program for BHC residents. Held at the New Farm Neighbourhood Centre, the program will commence Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> August, Covid restrictions permitting. The response from residents so far has been overwhelmingly positive. Registered participants are expressing excitement at the chance to get out of their homes and reconnect with others. With this program we hope to:

- Respond to the social isolation and loneliness being experienced by residents.
- Provide a safe and welcoming environment for residents to reconnect with community and meet new people.
- Connect and familiarise residents with Community and the New Farm Neighbourhood Centre where they can access further community and support programs.

We hope that with more programs and activities like these we can continue to support, empower, and provide opportunities for BHC residents to enhance their wellbeing and personal outcomes. Whilst BHC endeavours to share support resources, encourages, and even provides opportunities for covid-safe connection, there is still a significant need in our community for more to be done.

### Summary

Ultimately, we believe that more can and should be done to address the pervasive issues of social isolation and loneliness affecting thousands across Queensland. Whilst BHC will continue to play our small part in addressing these issues, we welcome the Parliamentary Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness and look forward to seeing what insights and actions will come from this important work.

Your sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kaitlyn Russell', is written over a light blue horizontal line.

Kaitlyn Russell  
Community Development Manager  
BHC