



Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation.

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Introduction

Benarrawa Community Development Association acknowledges the Traditional Owners of this land. Benarrawa is an Yagara word, which means the Country surrounding the Oxley Creek. Benarrawa CDA adopted this name with permission from some Jagera Elders and the Brisbane Council of Elders in the mid 1990s.

Benarrawa is a small and beautiful incorporated not-for-profit community organisation that has been working in the Chelmer-Oxley area and beyond for over 30 years. Benarrawa CDA predominantly uses community development methodology in working with local people across southwest Brisbane to together create, develop and sustain positive initiatives which address issues of poverty, social and economic isolation and exclusion, loneliness, and general neighbourhood concerns. Due to using this approach we are able to develop relationships over time based on mutual respect and trust. We are also able to reach out into the community and respond creatively to issues such as isolation and loneliness and meet people where they are at in their lives. Because we are a small underfunded organisation there are some obvious challenges due to having limited time and resources, however due to us working with community members as opposed to for, we have seen great opportunities for long-lasting positive change in participants lives e.g. Graceville Community Garden -local residents coming together to garden and connect, Naturebabes playgroup – local people wanting safe space for kids to have unstructured play, Solidarity group – local people coming together to learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and subsequently building relationships with Elders and community members over 30 years with an Annual calendar of events being created.

A key part of how we work is working in partnership with other organisations such as schools, neighbouring community centres, churches, Brisbane City Council and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, Elders and Community members. We do not do anything in isolation. Over the years, people tend to come back to Benarrawa at different points in their life as they feel that it is a safe place to connect and learn together. Over these 30 years of local work, the organisation has seen the local community become quite gentrified, however despite this gentrification, we have been made aware through our engagement project of 2018/19 of pockets of need in our locality. There are many Older people and people living with a disability and/or caring for a family member with a disability who are very vulnerable and isolated with multiple layers of impacting issues. Due to our position of longstanding relationships we have been able to connect with some of these members and are currently working on a community development outreach project – Strengthening Neighbourly Connections.

"Benarrawa is flowing. We dream that the people will listen to the land and to each other." - Benarrawa Dreaming Statement.

Social Isolation in Graceville, Chelmer, Sherwood, Corinda, Oxley

During 2018/19 Benarrawa invited community stakeholders to share their hopes and ideas about how to strengthen connections and grow resources and supports in our community through the Benarrawa Flowing Forward Community Engagement Project. This engagement process identified that residents who were experiencing marginalisation were significantly worse off, living in a well-resourced (gentrified) community, because there was an assumption that they had resources to access services and activities. Identified groups included individuals and families experiencing multiple layers of marginalisation such as low incomes, past trauma, disability, mental health, limited mobility due to physical, psychological, and emotional health conditions, language, and cultural barriers. The project identified that Sherwood, Oxley, and Corinda have a significant number of public housing and social housing blocks. Benarrawa's annual planning day with Sherwood Neighbourhood Centre confirmed that both organisations had increasing numbers of community members from these apartments accessing support and services. Community Profiling highlighted that 69% of public housing households had a person requiring assistance with personal care and daily living activities. In response to these findings Benarrawa received funding for the Strengthening Neighbourly Connections Project.

During this Project to date, we have engaged with 76% of residents living in 59 units in 5 apartment blocks in Sherwood and Corinda. These 5 apartment blocks were prioritised after discussions with Inala Housing Office workers who were concerned about the wellbeing, and multiple experiences of marginalisation of these residents. Most residents have or are experiencing social isolation. This has been articulated by residents due to the following barriers:

- ***Lack of physical mobility due to medical or health conditions***, many of these residents use a 4ww, most are older residents, but some are middle aged "I'd really like to visit the Neighbourhood Centre (500m's away) but I can't walk that far, especially if it's a bad day – I can walk up to Coles (the same distance) and get food when I'm feeling good".
- ***Concerns for their safety if they leave their unit due to Covid***. Many say their doctors have told them not to leave due to underlying chronic health conditions, "My doctor says I can't leave my unit"

- **Experiences of past, current or vicarious trauma.** Many residents tell stories of their past/present which demonstrate these experiences. This usually included experiences where they were a victim of violence.
- **Financial hardship** – many welcomed the extra funds during covid but for some this has brought new problem. “I brought a car from a friend’s friend, but it only worked for a month or so. I got a guy to come and fix it, but he needed a part and now says he won’t come here to do it”. Food insecurity and inability to pay bills or debts is also a common experience – “I got several bills all at once and now I don’t have any money for fresh food”, “I got extra money during lockdown however I used this to buy extra drugs as I had nothing else to do and I ended up wasting all my money and in prison and now I’m back on methadone and trying to sort myself all over again”.
- **Safety within the unit block** – many residents felt safe in their own home but not in the corridors or communal areas. Those in free standing townhouses or single ground floor units spoke more of connecting with neighbours in positive ways.
- **Single mothers parenting children or young adults with disabilities**, often with cultural/language or disability barriers themselves
- **Single middle-aged men**, isolated from family and children with health and wellbeing conditions.

Evidence of social isolation include:

- Two residents saying “oh my mouth hurts – I haven’t spoken to someone for this long (1/2hr) for ages”
- Residents offloading their personal circumstances/situation in detail very soon after introductions
- Residents articulating, they go nowhere other than their unit and don’t talk to many people
- Residents who don’t answer the door on numerous occasions, even though there is evidence they are home
- Residents expressing concern about other residents and asking us to drop in on them because they haven’t seen them, or are concerned about the behaviour they have witnessed
- Residents discussing having few if any friends
- Residents discussing not attending groups or social activities
- Residents discussing estrangement from their family members
- Evidence of drug/alcohol misuse
- Many residents express sleeping during the morning as they are up all night watching their favourite TV shows as nothing else to do during the day

Our approach to Loneliness and Isolation

Our approach to addressing social isolation in this community was to implement basic community development methodology with particular focus on building relationships based on trust and respect with residents of the identified housing blocks. We used skills such as deep listening, open, honest friendly and clear communication in our regular visits to residents in their own homes. We also provided support and referrals to services where appropriate.

In the early days of the project, we spent 3x 4hr blocks of time, 1 weekday morning, 2 weekday afternoon and 1 Sunday afternoon visiting residents in 59 identified units. We distributed a flyer under everyone's door advising when we were coming and followed up with "doorstep" visits. Workers and volunteers worked in pairs to visit residents at their door, adhering to current Covid regulations.

Each "Doorstep visit" included:

1. An introduction – who we were
2. Why we were here - to offer support to find out how they were going, what their interests were, their hopes for the future, how they found living in their apartment, were they connected to family and friends,
3. Providing information/resources/ warm referrals to support organisations, local groups
4. Would they like to get together with others – where and why
5. An Information pack – flyers from local community organisations including the local Neighbourhood Centre, food and financial assistance, wellbeing info,

Following the initial engagement phase where residents asked for a safe place to meet with others to play board games, do jigsaw puzzles, meet others, chat and share afternoon tea, a "Drop In Session" was organised at Sherwood Neighbourhood Centre on a Tuesday Afternoon between 1 and 2.30pm. This was within a 500m walking distance from all 5 apartment blocks. Flyers were distributed to the 59 Unit blocks and 500 flyers were letterbox dropped to residents in local streets. Five residents regularly attended 8 Drop-In sessions, 11 residents in total, 3 being residents not living in the identified blocks.

While the Drop-In session were in progress, 2 workers continued to visit residents in their homes. During this time Brisbane experienced a "Covid Lockdown", highlighting the already identified priority that residents preferred workers to visit them in their homes as after the lockdown there was decreased participation at the drop ins by some residents.

Currently, three Benarrawa workers continue to visit residents in their units each Tuesday afternoon to build relationships, provide emotional or practical support, information and referral to local services and groups. The project aims to, (using community development methodology) support individuals to grow in confidence and to increase their access to resources that can support them around their own issue/s. Another aim of this project is to bring residents together around common issues and themes to develop solutions and take actions to improve community wellbeing, connections, and resilience.

Outcomes to date include:

- Warm referral to 17 services, local groups or organisations for residents including food support, financial support, mental wellbeing services, craft, NDIS access, health services, legal, family violence and suicide support, social support, housing assistance.
- Peer support – residents sharing stories of resilience and change with other residents.
- Practical support – connecting residents to help each other with practical support in the home.
- Connection to a local friendly Café, local BCC library, parks, and greenspaces.
- Three Neighbourhood Centres working together to visit and engage with residents, provide information and support to residents.
- Due to Benarrawa being an underfunded organisation, we have strategically prioritised resources to continue building relationships with residents on Tuesday afternoons beyond the life of the grant, in line with a commitment to community development principles to strengthen the possibilities of sustainable outcomes that will benefit individuals and the

community. More funding is needed to continue this work in an ideal way using these principles.

Benarrawa Community Development Association

Benarrawa CDA has a 30 year history of using community development practice in our local community and beyond. Relationship building is at the heart of any community building process - this is our strength and ultimately our bread and butter – without relationships that are based on mutual respect and trust then reducing social isolation and loneliness cannot and will not happen. Also another key aspect of how we connect with community to help reduce social isolation and loneliness here at Benarrawa is our ability to be flexible and reach out to community members who are in need and to work alongside and with them around areas of need and/or interest.

An example of this is of a community member who was experiencing multiple impacting issues including – unstable housing, PTSD from a prior sexual assault, financial insecurity due to being unemployed and chronic health issues – approached the organisation when a paid cleaning position became available. This small financial contribution enabled L to get into secure accommodation and receive the much needed emotional and practical support from workers at Benarrawa which helped bolster her to encourage her to make some courageous steps forward and connect with issues that are important to her. L said, “I walked in the door and immediately felt home and that opening of a little job changed my life.” “Now through connections via Benarrawa I have 3 cleaning jobs and have no need to get emergency relief/support services. I have accessed NICE business course to set up own sewing/repair business, I have been able to volunteer at Benarrawa’s community events and to develop relationships with Aboriginal Elder’s and community members as I’m very passionate about this issue. This opportunity and subsequent relationships has helped me so much words cannot express it adequately. Its like a home away from home”. “Plus I have had the strength to learn about my ancestry and confront my past and have discovered so much about my father who I thought abandoned me but he was a war hero and had PTSD and couldn’t cope with life with family so now I understand and now I’m studying at University so I can write his story one day”. L is now, despite some ongoing challenges, an active vibrant member of our and her community. This is an example of how we approach relationship building with members of our community and is a great good news story!

This approach is validated by what we have found during our work in the Strengthening Neighbourly Connections project - it is clear that to do this work well with this group of very marginalised and vulnerable people there must be outreach into peoples homes/safe places to enable the relationships to develop over time. There must be adequate time set aside to do this work well as it takes time but once they are developed great outcomes can be created together, with long-standing connections made between residents/community members.

Neighbourhood Centres, Loneliness and Social Isolation

Despite the enormous impact Neighbourhood Centres have in reducing social isolation, they only receive a yearly average of \$134 00 in Neighbourhood Centre funding per centre from the Queensland Government. As loneliness and social isolation is increasing in society due to the effects of COVID19, mental health issues and transient housing, Neighbourhood Centres and their associated facilities are the most ideal social infrastructure to be leveraged, to reduce social isolation in Queensland Communities. 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.

In considering strategies for reducing loneliness and social isolation in Queensland, the Queensland Government needs to adequately resource centres as the key pieces of social infrastructure they are and can be to reduce loneliness and social isolation. By doing so, the Queensland Government has the opportunity to invest in citizen-led, place-based solutions. Token solutions to loneliness and social isolation by “cookie cutting” more social groups across the state will not address this epidemic. Local communities need to be empowered, through local Neighbourhood Centres, to unite and solve social issues together from the ground up. Each community has its own nuances and issues as evidenced through The Neighbourhood Centre’s projects, and each community can use their resources with the right guidance and investment through Queensland’s Neighbourhood Centres.

Recommendations

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 a 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.

Conclusion

Resources that prioritise engaging with residents in their own environment, start where they are at, provide adequate resources for individual support, access to community led education and learning and community development solutions to common issues and concerns through cocreated solutions.

National Neighbourhood Centre Week’s motto in 2021 was “Loneliness – The solution is Community”. Neighbourhood Centres are the beating heart of local communities. Any

strategy to address loneliness and social isolation in the future should ensure that these local, welcoming, place-based organisations are at front and centre, creating vital connection, healthy relationships and belonging for all Queenslanders. Our Neighbourhood Centre supports the QFCA's recommendations to this Inquiry to position Neighbourhood Centres as a key community-based vehicle for addressing social isolation and loneliness.

