



Friends for Good Inc. Submission to Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland

Committee Secretary
Community Support and Services Committee
Parliament House

Friends for Good welcomes the Queensland Parliament's interest and inquiry into loneliness and social isolation.

Friends for Good is a national not-for-profit and Australian loneliness pioneer. Our mission is to raise awareness of loneliness as a significant issue in the community and address gaps in services that foster a greater sense of connection and wellbeing for individuals and communities.

The nature and extent of the impact of social isolation and loneliness in Queensland

Almost 3 million people in Australia are experiencing high rates of loneliness, according to *Loneliness in Australia: research, context and new findings*, a 2019 Friends for Good research report (Lauria, E. www.friendsforgood.org.au). Similar rates of loneliness were found in a more recent report *More than Medicine: exploring social prescribing in Australia* (Lauria, E. www.friendsforgood.org.au). released in 2021, with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic occurring between the data collection for each study.

The 2019 research indicated that the percentage of people considered to be experiencing high rates of loneliness was 36.7% in the state of Queensland. If you would like more information about this, it can be provided.

Loneliness has serious health effects (as outlined in the Loneliness in Australia report), with loneliness impacting on people's wellbeing, including issues with impaired cognition, difficulty sleeping, less physical activity, and links with depression and suicidality. Biological impacts have been related to increased blood pressure, heart disease, immune dysregulation and twice the risk for Alzheimer's disease to name a few.

Key findings from the Loneliness in Australia report are:

1. A conservative estimate is that 15% of our sample would be considered to be experiencing high levels of loneliness. In the wider population, this would equate to almost 3 million (2,913,500) Australian adults.

2. Loneliness does not discriminate. Similar scores in loneliness were found for both men and women, people of all ages, those in cities, regional and rural areas. It impacts people from all walks of life.
3. 71.4% of people who say 'I can't really make ends meet' also say money is a barrier to making social connections.
4. The highest earners (\$3000+ per week/ \$156, 000+ per year) are significantly less lonely than the two lowest categories of earners (\$1 – \$299 per week/ \$1 – \$15, 599 per year).
5. The way people say they are doing economically impacts how lonely or connected they are. Those who report being able to get by easily with the money they have are the least lonely and have the lowest risk for social isolation.
6. There is a negative relationship between income and loneliness, as income increases, loneliness tends to decrease and vice versa.

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

The causes and drivers of social isolation and loneliness are varied. The Friends for Good Loneliness in Australia report mentioned above outlines the causes as quoted here (full details of references are available in the report):

A number of situational and individual factors have been associated with increased levels of loneliness. Experiences such as the death of a spouse, social anxiety and low income have all been related to higher levels of loneliness¹. Loneliness is hypothesised to have a bidirectional relationship with depression and functional limitations, that is depression and functional limitations may cause loneliness or may be caused by loneliness².

From different theoretical perspectives a number of explanations have been given for the cause of loneliness and how it impacts health and wellbeing. From a sociological perspective, loneliness is hypothesised to be caused by changes in society and the increasing 'liquidity' of relationships³. That is, relationships are more fleeting and fragile and loneliness is therefore a direct result of the social atmosphere people find themselves in. From this viewpoint the loneliness experienced by people in Western society is a result of consumerism, urbanisation and the rise of nuclear family units⁴.

An alternate view is that loneliness may be the result of an evolutionary drive, similar to hunger and thirst, that works to alert us to the need to find and nurture social relationships to ensure our survival⁵. From this perspective loneliness is a natural, biological response to a lack of social support that is useful in the short-term, but dangerous should it become chronic.

¹ Elmer, 2018

² Luo, Hawkey, Waite & Cacioppo, 2012

³ Bauman, 2000, Franklin & Tranter, 2008

⁴ Franklin, 2012

⁵ Cacioppo & Hawkey, 2009

The actual neurological mechanisms for what happens in the brain to cause loneliness is difficult to measure experimentally with human participants. Some evidence suggests that social exclusion activates the same pathways in the brain as physical pain⁶. Animal models of loneliness indicate changes in the brain structure and functioning as a result of being isolated⁷. Overall, the wealth of international research indicates that loneliness is harmful to physical, emotional and cognitive health, but how exactly these processes work remains unclear⁸.

The vastness of the geographic area of Queensland no doubt has a role to play in limiting social connectivity and increasing loneliness for many people. The Friends for Good FriendLine service, which provides a free, anonymous chat with a friendly volunteer, often hears from people living in Queensland whose personal experience bears this out.

Regular callers include people living in remote communities who struggle to make new friends due to low population numbers, people in rural communities who describe small towns that are their closest point of contact where there are no social events or limited groups to join, in addition to city dwellers who have found themselves isolated and lonely for a great many different reasons. Many callers are suffering from social anxiety or a range of complex physical and mental health issues that prevent them from overcoming the loneliness they are experiencing.

The protective factors known to mitigate social isolation and loneliness.

Loneliness impacts people from all walks of life and can have many and varied causes. There are, however, a number of protective factors that have been identified. Research is mostly correlational whereby associations between people's circumstances and scores on loneliness or social isolation measures are quantified. Some key protective factors that have been identified include: being in a relationship or living with others (especially significant for men; Baker, 2012), having a companion animal (McNicholas et al., 2005), having paid or voluntary work (Flood, 2005), having quality social connections (Teater, Chonody & Davis, 2021) and having financial stability (Lauria, 2019).

Many of the callers to the FriendLine service have none, or very few, of the protective factors listed. They tell us that they feel alone in the world and are clearly experiencing chronic loneliness. For some the friendly chat on FriendLine is the only contact they have with other people. We provide information about groups, activities or other professional help that is available. It is a common response from callers that they are very aware of what is available to them, however, they have found that these activities or interventions have not worked in the past or they feel they cannot take the steps to bring about change.

Friends for Good is therefore working to offer additional services in conjunction with the FriendLine chat, as for some callers the level of trust we have built with them may provide the opportunity to take a greater casework approach and help them to overcome or reduce

⁶ Eisenberger, Lieberman & Williams, 2003

⁷ Caioppo, Capitanio & Cacioppo, 2014

⁸ Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009

the loneliness they experience. This will require a much greater level of resourcing than is currently available, but has the potential to bring about significant change.

How the 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.

Friends for Good, as the first charity to focus solely on loneliness in Australia, has grappled with this question in regard to a national response to loneliness and social isolation. We know that loneliness affects people differently, that there are various types of loneliness and that it is complex to overcome.

Our response is that the first steps are to have a national and state-wide strategies that bring together all of the key stakeholders listed here, who have the opportunity to contribute to preventative measures and build on the work that churches, charities and clubs have been undertaking for decades. Many services and group activities may not have been formally evaluated in an academic sense, but no doubt have an extremely important role to play in preventing or alleviating loneliness.

The Friends for Good approach is to work across the following areas:

- Community education and awareness
- Research
- Wellbeing and
- Services

Broadly speaking each of these guides a body of work that stakeholders, including government, could engage in.

In the research space we need to know more about the experiences of people living in Queensland who are social isolated or feeling lonely. We have a very good indication of how many people we are talking about, but there is much work to be done to better understand their unique perspectives.

We need to educate the community about the detrimental affects of these health problems, especially to encourage people to take action to prevent them. To overcome the stigma associated with loneliness and social isolation the dialogue needs to be a public one and events such as conferences and symposia can engender this discussion.

Wellbeing could encompass many aspects. Do people live in places conducive to making connections? Do they have enough income to be socially engaged? Are there enough mental and physical supports for them? Is anyone helping them to make friends or engage in programs to improve their everyday lives?

There are services that can target and provide evidence that they are helping people to feel less lonely. Are their new services that can be developed, or existing ones extended? We are aware of unfunded services that, for example, are creating neighbour groups that have the potential to have a far greater reach and impact.

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.

There are many benefits of addressing social isolation and loneliness. The economic impact of loneliness in Australia has not been measured. However, when the health impacts that have been outlined above are taken into consideration this undoubtedly leads to increased government costs across various responsibilities, such as emergency department presentations, Medicare costs via GP visits and the management of chronic illness/co-morbidity. Overseas examples of the economic impact of loneliness are outlined in the Loneliness in Australia report. There are also flow on effects considering the cost to employers and the economy generally.

The effect on individuals is also significant. Addressing these issues has the potential to improve the lives of people in Queensland, helping them to be more connected and have a greater sense of wellbeing and ability to cope. There are countless ways that this could then contribute to greater civic participation.

A successful example of an initiative undertaken nationally is the Friends for Good FriendLine service. Callers chat to trained volunteers. Friends for Good have an office in Brisbane so that volunteers can speak with local callers, having a greater understanding of state-based issues and activities.

This service has been provided since 2018 and has an evidence base to show that it is successful. Our recent Quarterly Evaluation Survey results show that 98% of regular callers to FriendLine are feeling less lonely and over 80% are better able to cope with their loneliness. Anecdotally we also know that Friendline is a suicide prevention strategy for some callers. FriendLine could be adapted to have additional state services tailored to communities in Queensland. Such initiatives could mitigate against social isolation and loneliness.

Social isolation and loneliness can be measured in Queensland to determine whether strategies have been effective through the use of empirical scales or qualitative measures. Research solutions would need to be tailored according to the specific strategy, for example considering whether they are individual interventions or community wide approaches. If strategies are targeted at the broader Queensland population proxy measures of social isolation, for example, from ABS statistics could be used to infer levels of social connection.

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

To our knowledge there is currently not a national strategy to address loneliness in the Australian community. Friends for Good, in conjunction with the Friendship Alliance (www.friendshipalliance.org.au), a group of organisations working together to reduce social

isolation and loneliness has raised this issue with the Federal Government. We would encourage all state governments to work alongside the Federal Government to introduce this as soon as possible.

We see the role of a state-wide strategy to be developing a policy framework to understand and address the issues surrounding loneliness and isolation, setting targets and working with the not-for-profit sector and other stakeholders to deliver a preventative action-orientated approach to address these problems.

The scope of a strategy could be extremely broad, being a whole-of-government response, in line with overseas models. The UK Government example considers loneliness across various areas of its policy and work: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-connected-society-a-strategy-for-tackling-loneliness>

Although this may be something to aim for over time, taking steps toward something this extensive would be very worthwhile and effective.

The priorities to consider should be increased service provision to assist individuals to cope with their loneliness, an education campaign to help the community to better understand the harmful effects of loneliness and to overcome stigma and a national approach to show leadership in working with other states to elevate these issues as critically needing attention and action.

Given the collective knowledge about loneliness and social isolation, current research, understanding of global models and active community initiatives and projects, Friends for Good and the Friendship Alliance are well placed to collaborate with Government to develop and deliver a Loneliness & Isolation Strategy.



Friends for Good
Patricia Lauria
Chief Executive Officer

