Moreton Bay
Regional Council

Phone:	(07) 3205 0555
Our Ref:	62727949
Date:	18 August 2021

Committee Secretary
Community Support and Services Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Queensland 4000
CSSC@parliament.qld.gov.au

To the Committee Secretary,

Submission to the Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness

I am pleased to enclose a submission to the Inquiry, describing the wide scope of work undertaken by Moreton Bay Regional Council in addressing social isolation and loneliness in the Region.

Council provides direct service responses, community infrastructure, and community programs and support to residents and community organisations to facilitate community connections and strengthen community resilience.

COVID-19 has exacerbated loneliness and social isolation in all communities. There are inspiring examples of community initiatives aiming to maintain social connection whilst physically distanced and a recommendation is included in the submission that these be evaluated, so that we can build our knowledge to inform future work.

Community strengthening efforts usually require support to enable them to happen. Community organisations require additional resources to undertake community building activities such as assertive outreach to isolated individuals, alongside crisis and clinical responses.

I look forward to the outcomes of the Inquiry.

Yours faithfully,

Mark McCormack
Manager
Community Services, Sport & Recreation

Enc   Submission to the Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness

Moreton Bay Regional Council

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

INTRODUCTION

The following submission is presented by Moreton Bay Regional Council to the Queensland Parliament Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness (2021). The submission discusses the challenges faced by the region in terms of social isolation and loneliness, current programs and service directions the Council undertakes and opportunities for state government, Council and the community sector to work together to mitigate and manage the impacts of social isolation and loneliness.

BACKGROUND

The Moreton Bay Region

The Moreton Bay Region spans more than 2,045 square kilometres across Jinibara, Kabi Kabi and Yuggara Country. The local government areas comprises rural townships, urban centres, coastal villages and thriving business precincts. The Moreton Bay Region is one of Australia's fastest growing urban regions with its population forecast to grow by over 40 percent to more than 645,000 by 2036.

ISSUES

Social isolation and loneliness have significant impacts on social cohesion and wellbeing, as well as individual mental and physical health and as such bring significant societal costs that could be reduced through early intervention.

Causes and Drivers

Causes and drivers of social isolation can be many and varied. For some it's a lack of social connection (either face to face or virtual), for others isolation caused by geographic or physical isolation (e.g. unable to leave the house due to health reasons, moving to a new area without existing social connections) can create a feeling of loneliness and isolation, for others there can be an association with lacking sense of belonging at a family and community level and perceived sense of being different (e.g. racial or gender diversity, being out of the workforces, experiencing social or economic vulnerability).

Vulnerable communities

What causes one person to feel isolated or lonely may be different to another. Consequently, a range of strategies to address social isolation and loneliness are required at an individual and community level.

The Queensland Government (insert reference) highlights the following groups as being vulnerable to, or most at risk of, social isolation:

- Seniors;
- Youth;
- People with a disability;
- LGBTIQ people;
- Culturally and linguistically diverse people; and
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Other groups often affected by social isolation include people relocating to a different neighbourhood, city or state, people experiencing transport disadvantage, people experiencing homelessness and victims of family and domestic violence and elder abuse.

Moreton Bay Regional Council

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS (Cont.)

Extent of social isolation and loneliness

Due to a lack of consistency in definition of social isolation and loneliness, and varied methods of assessing them at community level, it is difficult to say how many experience people in Australia experience social isolation or loneliness. Some of the most recent studies by Relationships Australia (2018) and Australian Psychological Society (2018) reported by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare indicate that:

- 1 in 10 (9.5%, or around 1.8 million based on 2016 population) Australians aged 15 and over report lacking social support (Relationships Australia 2018)
- about 1 in 4 report they are currently experiencing an episode of loneliness (Australian Psychological Society 2018)
- 1 in 2 (51%) report they feel lonely for at least 1 day each week (Australian Psychological Society 2018).

Anecdotal reporting and emerging international research that higher levels of isolation and loneliness have been experienced as a result of COVID 19 impacts in terms of lockdowns; border closures; and grief following the death of a loved one.

In a recent community survey (Moreton Says 2021) by Moreton Bay Regional Council of more than 4,100 residents, Council discussed participants' sense of belonging with their community and their sense of community strength through ability to manage change and take action. A lack of sense of belonging along with a lack of local community support can be key contributors to individuals' feelings of isolation and loneliness.

- Satisfaction with your sense of belonging - 72% satisfied or very satisfied;
- My community is able to manage change - 48% agree or strongly agree;
- My community is organised and can take effective action - 48% agree or strongly agree.

This data clearly indicates there is capacity to strengthen local services and programs to enhance residents sense of belonging and the community's ability to manage change e.g. COVID 19 impacts.

The Moreton Bay Region is expected to grow significantly over the next 20 years. Successful settlement of new residents in the Region will be a crucial determinant of community wellbeing in the future. Facilitating a sense of belonging for new residents to the natural and built environments and connections to long-term residents will be essential.

Moving home can affect a person's access to social supports. It can take time and require a level of personal skills and confidence to participate in community life. It can be difficult to find services and educational, employment or recreational opportunities and to make new acquaintances or form new friendships. Meeting neighbours for the first time can also be difficult to navigate.

Protective Factors and Mitigation Strategies

International research indicates there are a range of strategies and protective factors that can reduce rates of social isolation and feelings of loneliness, including individual and community interventions within clinical and community development contexts. These range from individual counselling and therapy, companion programs (including support workers, volunteers and pets), accessible and affordable transport, virtual connections programs through telephone and internet, facilitated contact with local services such as pharmacists and grocers or facilitated connections to community interest groups and outreach services for people experiencing homelessness.

Moreton Bay Regional Council

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS (Cont.)

Successful Initiatives

The Campaign to End Loneliness (www.campaigntoendloneliness.org) report *Promising Approaches Revisited: Effective action on loneliness in later life (2020)* provides a range of case studies highlighting successful community initiatives. These include community connector services, not-for-profit community interest groups, collaborations between charities with a focus on connection, physical wellbeing programs, advocacy campaigns and programs that promote the voices of underrepresented sectors of the community. While these primarily focus on older persons, they have applicability to many individuals experiencing social isolation and loneliness regardless of their age.

Measurement of SI&L and of program impacts

There are a variety of mechanisms across the world that assess social isolation and loneliness however, limited formal assessment of impacts of programs and services in reducing them particularly in a community context.

Current Investment

Investment of state and federal governments often focuses on direct interventions to manage the impacts of resulting physical and mental illness and less so for prevention. Many local governments have had a role in developing social cohesion and community connectedness through program delivery and supporting community interest groups through funding and capacity building. Community service providers also play strong role in developing community connections to reduce social isolation, often supported by state and federal funding.

Moreton Bay Regional Council aims to build connected and resilient communities through direct service responses, provision of community infrastructure, and delivery of community programs and support. Examples of Council's response to social isolation and loneliness include:

Direct service responses
- The Disaster Management Team builds community capacity to reach vulnerable and socially isolated people in emergency situations.
- Through *Council's Response to People Experiencing Homelessness (Council controlled land)* Council connects people with specialist services for housing assistance.
- Community-facing staff respond to requests for information about Council and community programs and services.

Community programs
- In 2020/21, the Healthy Active Moreton program delivered 3,473 activity sessions at over 170 locations across the Region to 38,392 people.
- In 2020/21, Libraries loaned 41,147 items to 389 isolated people through the Home Library service.
- During the same period Libraries also delivered 4,487 events, workshops, presentations and programs such as story sessions for children and families, with at least 77,000 community interactions over 2020-2021. This was achieved despite the impact of COVID on the number of initiatives that could be offered and restrictions on direct, in- person service.
- The Connected Communities program builds the knowledge, skills and confidence of residents to facilitate positive community change.
- The Community Development in Practice program enhances the knowledge and skills of community services workers to support participatory community development processes.
- The Know Your Neighbour program raises awareness of the benefits of community connectedness and provides information and tools to residents to get to know their neighbours.
- Council partners with community organisations to deliver a series of Welcome Program events for new residents from refugee and migrant backgrounds.
- Council supports the annual community led Reconnect event to support people experiencing homelessness with support services.

Moreton Bay Regional Council

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS (Cont.)

Support to community groups

- Council provides ongoing governance support and training to more than 750 community, sport and recreation groups in the Region.
- Community grants are provided to not-for-profit community organisations to undertake community activities. In 2020/21 Council granted $1,638 million to community organisations through its community grant programs and an additional $7,587 million was granted through the COVID-19 rapid response grants.
- Council's Community Development unit facilitates information exchange and connections between service providers through networks such as the Regional Community Interagency, Youth Matters network and the First Nations Murri Network and Yarning Circle.
- Coordination of the regional COVID 19 Response including establishment of the Human and Social Recovery working group.
- Council provides free promotion opportunities for local events and activities provided by organisations, services, clubs and groups.

Provision of community facilities and amenities

- Council plans for and provides community facilities and amenities for people to participate in activities and for community groups to meet and undertake a range of social and recreational activities. The community facility network includes community leased facilities, community halls, environment centres, Libraries and mobile library, Galleries and Museums.
- Council also plans and delivers a network of parks, outdoor recreation and sporting facilities.

Role, scope and priorities of state-wide strategy - Recommendations

Council will continue to provide service responses, community infrastructure, and programs and support to residents and community organisations to facilitate community connections and strengthen community resilience.

There remains a need to work in partnership with the community services sector and with state government agencies such as the Department of Communities, Department of Education and Training and Department of Housing and Homelessness and Department of Local Government to collaborate on early intervention strategies at a community level. This may include increased state government funding to community organisations to increase their accessibility and broaden their spectrum of service delivery to increase the range and reach of community building activities.

A state-wide strategy, developed in partnership could provide a framework for collaboration between community groups, community service providers, and local and state governments.

Recommendations are provided below.

1. Provide funding to community organisations, such as neighbourhood centres, to employ place-based community development workers. These workers may be based in communities where social isolation is identified and/or where new communities are emerging. The workers may provide new and existing residents with information and orientation to local activities and services and facilitate opportunities for social connection.

2. Increase funding for service-oriented organisations, such as neighbourhood centres, carer organisations, domestic violence services and homelessness services, to provide more off-site and assertive outreach services and community building activities.

3. Increase funding for community transport to connect people experiencing social isolation and loneliness with existing opportunities.

4

Moreton Bay Regional Council

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS (Cont.)

4. Provide grants to support community led initiatives that actively address social isolation and loneliness. These programs could include co-design initiatives with people who have a lived experience of social isolation and loneliness, programs or activities that focus on promoting inclusiveness and celebrating diversity, human and pet companionship programs, virtual and face to face community connector programs, developing community led advocacy programs for vulnerable groups and communities.

5. Develop a portfolio of local and national case studies of successful programs to provide guidance to new initiatives.

6. Encourage, through funding, initiatives that seek to evaluate the impacts of community led programs focused on reducing social isolation and loneliness.