TOWNSVILLE CITY COUNCIL

City of
Townsville

Date >> 18 August 2021

Attention: Committee Secretary
Community Support and Services Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Qld 4000

Email: CSSC@parliament.qld.gov.au

SUBJECT >>   INQUIRY SUBMISSION - Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland (the Inquiry)

Townsville City Council (Council) appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland Inquiry.

Council applauds the Queensland Government in utilising the Inquiry process to inform state-wide mitigation strategies through localised knowledge and lived experience understanding of social isolation and loneliness factors experienced by people living in Queensland.

Council provides the below information as insight to learnings of the Townsville community in relation to the Inquiry topic and welcomes further consultation if required.

Nature and extent of the impact of social isolation and loneliness in Queensland
- Generational living (environment changes across the decades) - i.e. moving from one to two working parents, increase in people living alone or not being in relationships, changes in workforce structures, increase in cost of living etc.
- Reduced opportunities for social connection skills learnt through generational skills exchange – i.e time poor environments reduces opportunities for life skills learning between grandparents, parents/carers, Elder and children.
- Changes within a person's life choices/circumstance which they are unable to mitigate – i.e unplanned unemployment, COVID-19 business lockdowns, health matters, financial crisis.
- Loss of community connection and social cohesiveness – i.e more time spent at home then in the community, lack of understanding of other cultures etc.
- Person-centred perspective reduces awareness and importance of community sense of belonging – i.e. focus on self than on others.

TOWNSVILLE CITY COUNCIL

City of
Townsville

- Creation of public realm – i.e. public spaces not conducive for gathering, too much bricks and mortar, need for more engaging spaces.

Vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals or groups at significant risk across the life course

- Seniors.
- Youth.
- First Nations People.
- Multicultural community.
- People with physical and cognitive disabilities.
- People experiencing Mental Health issues.
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ) community.
- People experiencing poverty or homelessness.
- People experiencing Family or Domestic Violence – including child abuse and senior abuse.
- Children experiencing decreased schooling attendance.
- Single parents.
- Low-income families.
- Unemployed.
- Poor english proficiency.

Interplay of COVID-19

The following information was formulated by the NQ Taskforce to identify localised understanding COVID-19 and recovery response considerations in relation to Human and Social impacts:

- Mental Health and Suicide - higher levels of anxiety and psychological distress in the general population was reported, and that some of those with severe, complex, and chronic mental illness disconnected from services.
- Domestic and Family Violence - exacerbated levels of Domestic and Family Violence. Evidence from the local North Queensland Domestic Violence Resource Service indicated that isolation measures resulted in an increase in complexity and coercive tactics used by perpetrators. Examples include, withholding access to children due to 'social distancing'; non-compliance with family court orders; refusing to allow victims to leave the home; increased control of all day-to-day activities with people either becoming unemployed or working from home during this time. An important protective factor for victims is often their workplace which they were unable to access in lockdown.
- Homelessness and Affordable Housing - additional pressure on social and low-cost housing.

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City of
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- Youth - Young people experienced additional stresses because of the COVID-19 pandemic and reached out to help-line services in greater numbers than before.

Council conducted a COVID-19 Social Impact Survey (via Social Suite Platform), the table below compares data from week 3 (14/5/2020) to week 9 (26/6/2020) of the survey.

Item	Week 3	Week 9
Responses received	593	781
Number of submitted surveys	790	1776
Sense of Community and Safety		
Percentage of people say that social distancing has had a negative impact on their community	47%	45%
Percentage of people feel that the vulnerable members of their community are not well supported during this time.	18%	19%
Percentage of people do not feel safe going out	21%	24%
Loneliness and Social Isolation		
Percentage of people feel lonely	30%	28%
Percentage of people do not maintain regular virtual contact with friends and family	11%	13%
Resilience		
Percentage of people have a stress rating of 7 or more out of 10	68%	69%
Anxiety and Fear Around Mortality		
Percentage of people are worried about being infected by COVID-19	34%	38%
Percentage of people believe themselves and their family would not recover if they were to become infected	34%	37%
Percentage of people do not have access to accurate facts and information on when to get tested for COVID-19	6%	6%
Percentage of people do not have access to accurate facts and information on when to self-quarantine	3%	4%
Employment and Income		
Percentage of people feel that their job is at risk as a result of COVID-19	27%	27%
Percentage of people say that their spending habits have changed since the COVID-19 pandemic	59%	55%
Percentage of people say that they are unable to continue providing for their families as a result of COVID-19 pandemic.	18%	17%

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City of
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In addition to the above:

- COVID-19 has impacted the confidence across the various communities that make up Townsville.
- Confusion on how to interact with others due to the risk of disease which creates a level of mistrust in community.
- The community initially also experienced an element of cultural racism.
- Impact to community groups (i.e community sporting groups, cultural groups, socialising groups for the elderly).
- Change in community liveability values (positive change) – refer to Gulliver Liveability Study 2020 example below.

Gulliver Liveability Study 2020 – Council engaged PlaceScore to undertake a second liveability study of the Townsville suburb of Gulliver, to understand how physical distancing had impacted their community values and liveability (comparing neighbourhood liveability data from 2019 to 2020). Information learnt from this study identified community directions for crisis investment and neighbourhood resilience.

Key learnings included:

- An increase in community values associated with safe exercise.
- A shift in the strength of having locally owned and operated business.
- A higher priority for quality public spaces and access to open spaces.
- Community members aged 65+ felt further isolated.

From the study, respondents were asked for their 'big or little idea', 49% of respondents sought for more attention on use of open green spaces, leisure spaces and amenities; and 29% of respondents referred to increased opportunities of community connection activities. Suggestions from the Gulliver community to address included:

- Elderly Care Community Group approaches.
- Developing a calendar of free events.
- Increase in outdoor events/options - yoga, movie screenings, exercise equipment, activate the local parks.
- Increase volunteer programs.
- Find ways to keep businesses open for people to attend rather than stay indoors.
- Community gathering events – pop up markets, evening trading events.

<u>Causes and drivers of social isolation and loneliness</u>
Generational changes in the way people live have over time impacted on the level of 'natural' community connection, which has contributed to social isolation and loneliness factors that may have not be as prevalent in earlier generations, such us:

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City of
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- Cost of living.
- Economic factors relating to situational and intergeneration unemployment.
- Homelessness.
- Poverty.
- Private property construction decisions – e.g. high fenced properties.
- Changes in intergenerational family living.
- Social media/technology use and increase access to the 'outside world'.
- Challenges with use of technology (access to and user knowledge, e.g., learnings from the 2019 Townsville Flood – senior citizens struggled with use of technology to keep up to date with flood information).
- Changes in household arrangements – both parents working, being 'time poor' in general community life participation.
- Personal safety fears - Community crime, Exploitation.

Protective factors known to mitigate social isolation and loneliness
- Value and sense of community belonging, and involvement is created in the early development and youth ages.
- Connection with people outside a person's immediate family circle.
- Opportunities for natural social interactions.

Benefits of addressing social isolation and loneliness
- Connected life for everyone.
- Builds resilience in people and the community.
- Builds confidence to socially participate.
- Reduces individualism within communities.
- Builds a community's social capital.
- Promotes liveability.
- Increases placed based (neighbourhood level) interactions.

Examples of successful initiatives undertaken nationally and internationally and how they are measured
- PlaceScore Liveability study.
- Neighbour Day programs.
- Christmas Together programs.
- Community Greening initiatives (Adopt a garden bed, Verge/footpath gardening, Community gardening, Friends of the garden groups).
- Citizen science projects.
- Participatory cities approach.
- Art in community.
- Intergenerational projects bringing Seniors, children, and youth together.

TOWNSVILLE CITY COUNCIL

- Healthy and active programs e.g. Walking Groups.
- Neighbourhood activation initiatives - Street libraries, Community toy libraries, Street gardens/community gardens, Community Kitchens
- Volunteer based programs.
- Initiatives that have incentives such as a small monetary prizes.

Townsville City Council appreciates the opportunity to provide comment in relation to the Inquiry. Should you require assistance regarding any of the matters raised in this submission, please contact our Principal Inclusive Communities, Donna Jackson on ▆▆▆▆▆▆ or ▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆.

Yours sincerely

Cr Mark Molachino
Acting Mayor of Townsville

Scott Mason
Director
Lifestyle, Economy, Environment and Planning