Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation.

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Introduction

Caloundra Community Centre is an incorporated community based organisation which has been operating for over 35 years. The organisation seeks to respond to and address the needs of the most socially, culturally and economically disadvantaged and discriminated groups in the community. All the activities of the community centre have connection, social participation, inclusion, wellbeing and action for change at their core. In turn, these activities are developed within a community development framework that actively involves local community members in the governance of the organisation and the development and delivery of its activities. Practically, the organisation offers a range of community support services, social programs, individual supports and community development opportunities throughout the region, including the southern part of the Sunshine Coast hinterland and two physical sites – the Caloundra Community Centre and Baringa Community Centre.

Social Isolation and loneliness in the Greater Caloundra area

In terms of defining loneliness and social isolation, we like the Lim, Eres and Peck (2019) definition that defines loneliness as "a subjective feeling of social isolation that is more related to the perceived quality rather than the quantity of relationships" and defines social isolation as the "objectively quantifiable social contacts and network size" of people (cited in Social isolation and Loneliness, David Perry, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria 2020).

Accordingly, the community centre prioritises a welcoming and respectful approach that values the quality of the relationship with community members, rather than a transactional approach, and is also why the centre has adopted a community development framework. The success of this approach in fostering quality relationships with the community is exhibited by the following comment from a participant in one of the family programs: "When I come to the Community Centre I feel a sense of belonging…. I feel grounded."

The Caloundra area has several of the population characteristics that have been identified as 'risk factors for loneliness' (see Australian Loneliness Report 2018).

This includes a higher proportion of one person households living alone (34.2%) than the rest of the Queensland population (23.5%), based on 2016 data. A community member voiced this risk factor when they said, "I'm lucky I have a dog and cat to keep me company... Being on your own for too long makes me feel lonely." Eunice

Additionally, across the sunshine coast region there is a high proportion of the population that has moved to the region or moved within it. This population migration includes within the region, within the state, from interstate and internationally. Moving to new locations and finding your own local connections is one of the themes that we often hear, for example, "I used to have a very active social life in the UK, but I recently migrated to Sunshine Coast with my husband to live with my son and his family. Even though I live in a busy household with a family of six others, I felt lonely when I did not have a place to make new friends, feel needed, exchange ideas and projects. I realized that only my motivation could push myself out of the couch and explore what this community has to offer." Carol

The Caloundra area also has a significantly larger proportion of older residents compared to the whole of Queensland. Based on 2016 figures the proportion of 'seniors' (aged 70-84 years of age) is 6.1% more than the Qld average. This increases to over double the state average in the 'elderly' (aged 85 years and more) cohort with the proportion being 4.4% compared to 1.8%.

While the community centre takes a universal approach to all community members, our observations are that the combination of migration, lone households and ageing are together significant factors for decreased social connection and then loneliness. The following comment brings these factors together: "When I arrived to the Sunshine Coast I only knew my daughter. She was very busy and I realized that I had to search how to connect with others myself. I searched where I could connect with others without financial impact. I am grateful that groups like Global Hub gave me a place to belong." Lorraine

Our approach to Loneliness and Isolation

At Caloundra Community Centre we believe that the most useful way to address social isolation and loneliness is by working alongside local community members to co-develop or support them with their own responses. As workers this means that we seek to listen and learn alongside community members to support them to support others to create a significant part of the social infrastructure of the local area. This is not a Caloundra Community Centre specific approach as it is one employed in most neighbourhood and community centres across the state and indeed Australia. The approach can be summed up as a response that is place based and unique to the local community. Or as a community member expressed it, "Loneliness is universal and diverse and so should be the response" (Loneliness Forum Participant).

Two specific examples of local response that form part of the community centres efforts to address loneliness and social isolation are the **Loneliness, Let's be connected forum** and the **Pets for Life** program.

The Loneliness, Let's be connected forum took place at Northshore Community Centre in April 2021. The forum had over 90 participants including community members, people with lived experience, service and community groups and government representatives. From out of the conversations at this forum came the following learnings: "Loneliness does not discriminate; it happens to everyone. Everyone has a different experience of loneliness. It comes when life changes, parenting, empty nest, moves. It's a loss of connection, identity, deep knowing of self. Not having people, you can be vulnerable with. We can be lonely even when we are with people. We can't assume people are lonely because they are alone".

Another initiative at Caloundra Community Centre that is focussed on decreasing social isolation is the Pets for Life program. This program connects volunteers with local pet owners who require some support. Pets for Life responds to social isolation and loneliness within the community by increasing participants' social connections. This is done through establishing volunteer and pet owner arrangements and allowing relationships to flourish. At the end of 2020 the Pets for Life program had over 180 community members participating in it. The program is currently 100% funded directly by the Caloundra Community Centre. In early February 2020 an evaluation of the programs volunteers found that 83.8% of them stated they had established a friendship with a Pets for Life pet owner.

We believe that working alongside community members provides the highest quality way to determine changes in social isolation and loneliness. Ideally, incorporating measurements or evaluation into conversations with people who are participating in the activities enables this to occur in the most meaningful way. Respect, honesty and trust are the cornerstones of meaningful conversations, so it makes sense to ground evaluations within this context. This was expressed more eloquently by a community member who said, "Integrity, authenticity and trust can turn loneliness into relationships." (Forum participant, Loneliness, Let's be connected forum 14 April 2021).

This approach was utilised at Caloundra Community Centre throughout July to Sept 2019 when participants in activities at the centre were directly asked, "Do you feel more connected to the community?". Of the 226 people who responded, 98% indicated yes to this question.

Caloundra Community Centre

Caloundra Community Centre CC offers many social and interest groups that provide opportunity for social connection for community members. The current listing of groups includes Global Hub, Coffee Craft and Chat Morning tea, Music Group, Minecraft Mates, Boomerang Bags, Bush Poetry & Writers Drop in Chat, Centaclub, Functional Fitness, Ukulele group, Yoga for Men, Women's Wellness, Paper Craft, Migrant Welcome Hub, Reading for Reconciliation, Yoga, LUNA and Repair Café. New groups occasionally form and established groups occasionally contract. This is all dependent upon community involvement.

Weekly participation levels in these groups oscillate, however over the course of each week approximately 300 people participate in activities at the community centres. The majority of these activities are all community led and are low or no cost. The Community Centre supports these groups by offering a suitable venue at an affordable price and providing staff to occasionally guide and support the group. This is community development practice in action. As community members put it, "The community centre is important to me as it gives chance to connect and live normal", and, "Great centre. Very accessible. Have only been in Caloundra since 18 Dec 2020 and have found this a good place to find social support".

From a cost benefit analysis this is a very effective investment given the economic cost of loneliness is estimated as upwards of $22,000 per older adults over 15 years (based on UK data cited in Ending Loneliness Together in Australia 2020:25).

Additionally, the community centre also supports a range of people individually to enable them to build their own capacity, agency and skills. Programs such as the **Parenting and Families** support program, **Skilling Queenslanders for Work** (SQW), **Hinterland Community Development** program, **Info and Referral**, **Supported playgroups**, **Suicide Prevention in Local Communities**, **Pets for Life**, **Multicultural program**, **Grandparents as Parents** and **Community Assistance** often connect with people individually before facilitating their connection into groups. While each of these programs might be slightly different in their offering, they share the objectives of building connections, feelings of safety, feelings of wellbeing, empowering individuals and capacity building.

For example, some participants have expressed their own outcome as, "I feel connected to others because I can communicate better, and I have gained conflict resolution skills. I no longer take on other's problems, and I am becoming a better listener" (Families program participant), and, "I have no family in Australia so I feel lonely all the time excepts when I come to the community centre where I have my friends and people who can help me." Jenna

Wonderfully, in a 2020 survey of SQW participants, 100% stated they had made at least one friend through their group learning sessions.

An additional element of the community centre that most of the community groups and several of the community centre programs share is that they are volunteer powered. Across the whole organisation this would amount to 160 to 180 volunteers. So volunteering also plays a major role in reducing social isolation. For example, the two most common reasons that new people begin volunteering in the Pets for Life program is to 'meet new people' and 'give back to the community' – both of these reasons are connection and wellbeing reasons. Economically this could be expressed using the formula of $25 per hour of volunteer time x 160 volunteer's x 2 hours per week = $416,000 to come up with an annual dollar contribution to the community.

Alternatively, it could be summed up in the words of one of the Pets for Life volunteers, "As I say, it's the friendship – without being all soppy – we develop really lovely friendships. We're not clients, we're friends and that's the best thing about Pets for Life".

Neighbourhood Centres, Loneliness and Social Isolation

While Caloundra Community Centre is named a 'community centre' it identifies itself as one of the 140 funded "neighbourhood centres" throughout Queensland. We see local neighbourhood based responses as the key mechanism to purposefully addressing societal instances of loneliness by building greater social connections and being the lead social infrastructure organisations in their towns and suburbs.

As loneliness and social isolation is increasing in society due to the effects of COVID19, mental health issues, housing stress and significant population migration, 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, we suggest that the Queensland Government adequately resource neighbourhood 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 and place-based solutions. We don't believe that top down directed or same-size-fits-all state-wide approaches to addressing loneliness and social isolation will produce good value for money outcomes. Locally developed and locally lead initiatives, as demonstrated around Queensland by Neighbourhood Centres, are needed to enable local residents to solve social issues from the ground up.

Our Neighbourhood Centre supports the Queensland Families and Communities Association recommendations to this Inquiry to position Neighbourhood Centres as a key community-based vehicle for addressing social isolation and loneliness.

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Conclusion

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.

Additionally, the Caloundra Community Centre supports the Queensland Families and Communities Association (QFCA) submission to this inquiry. QFCA is the peak body of Neighbourhood Centres in Queensland and recommends:

- o 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

- o Strength Based Awareness Campaign emphasising the key role of NCC's, creating increased awareness of centres as hubs of connection for social isolated individuals

- o Enhance Neighbourhood Centre Digital and Physical Infrastructure to connect isolated individuals in communities using hybrid online and in-person methods

- o Resource QFCA to deliver additional NCC sector support including implementing a NCC Reporting Framework which measures social isolation and loneliness.