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Member for South Brisbane



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Committee Secretary  
Community Support and Services Committee  
Parliament House  
GEORGE STREET QLD 4000

### **Submission - inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland**

Dear Community Support and Services Committee,

Thank you for conducting an inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland. As our state starts to recover from the shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic, it's vital that our social infrastructure is resourced to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

In a state as wealthy as Queensland, there is no impediment to this other than political will. The occurrence of social isolation and loneliness in our society is well-documented, and the evidence for the solutions is clear.

It's critical that a statewide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness includes robust funding for social infrastructure and services, including healthcare, education, housing, social supports and transport. This strategy must have reference to the available evidence, with a universal approach that also considers the specific needs of cohorts that we know are more vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness: seniors, migrants, people with disability, new parents, young people, including young men, and international students. Key responses would be cross-sectoral, and could be funded by increased revenue from big corporations, including a bank levy, developer tax and increasing mining royalties. This would give Queensland billions of dollars

to invest in universally accessible services and infrastructure, that gives all Queenslanders access to the services, communities and supports they need.

### **Social isolation and loneliness in modern Australian society**

In 2019 the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) released one of the first comprehensive reviews of social isolation and loneliness in Australians' lives.<sup>1</sup> Both are harmful to mental and physical health, yet social isolation and loneliness are defined differently.

Social isolation is seen as the state of having minimal contact with others, whereas loneliness is a subjective state of negative feelings about having a lower level of social contact than desired. Definitions vary, but it is clear that the quality of contact is relevant to social isolation, and that loneliness is the more subjective experience.

Drawing on the 2019 AIHW report, and other data and research, in a world where we are more connected by technology than ever before, it is clear that social isolation and loneliness are still major issues for Australians:

- 1 in 10 Australians aged 15 and over said they lacked social support. One in four reported they were currently experiencing loneliness, and one in two said they felt lonely for at least one day each week.
- Loneliness tends to be more common in young adults, males, those living alone and those with children.
- Men tend to report higher levels of loneliness than women, which may be due to women tending to have more social support than men.
- A Relationships Australia study from 2018 showed higher levels of loneliness among older people, although a study by the Australian Psychological Society in the same year showed that Australians aged over 65 years old who are married experienced the lowest levels of loneliness.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/social-isolation-and-loneliness>

- Men aged 25-44 on high incomes are more likely to be lonely, while women of all ages on low incomes are far more likely to be lonely than those on high incomes.
- There are few differences in loneliness levels between urban, regional and rural areas, but young men living in regional areas experience higher rates of social isolation than men in major cities.
- For older people, loneliness and isolation can also lead to poorer cognitive function and memory.<sup>2</sup>
- Poverty is also a key factor contributing to loneliness and isolation.<sup>3</sup>
- Racism and racial discrimination can also contribute to social isolation and psychological distress,<sup>4</sup> which includes people avoiding gatherings, institutions and situations for fear of discrimination.<sup>5</sup>
- LGBTIQ+ people similarly face discrimination that can lead into isolation and loneliness.<sup>6</sup>

In modern times, patterns of industrialisation, privatisation, urbanisation and the impacts of capitalism have fostered individualism, with transformations in the way we live, travel and work<sup>7</sup> that have contributed to endemic loneliness and social isolation.

To be clear: the way humans live, work and relax are vastly different in the modern western context than in traditional societies. Individualism, smaller family support structures and the demands of working in a growth economy can result in less social connection, support and collective responsibility.

Human wellbeing is linked to our capacity to connect with others, but the competition and consumerism fostered under capitalism reduce our capacity for social connection. The decline of trade unions for example, once thriving collective organisations through which people could find solidarity, social connections, and the fight for common goals, have waned as membership has declined.

<sup>2</sup> [How simple policy changes can help us age better and prevent cognitive decline \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/how-simple-policy-changes-can-help-us-age-better-and-prevent-cognitive-decline-121111)

<sup>3</sup> [Loneliness is a social cancer, every bit as alarming as cancer itself \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/loneliness-is-a-social-cancer-every-bit-as-alarming-as-cancer-itself-121111)

<sup>4</sup> [Mental health impacts of racial discrimination in Australian culturally and linguistically diverse communities: a cross-sectional survey | BMC Public Health | Full Text \(biomedcentral.com\)](https://biomedcentral.com/fulltext/BMC-PublicHealth-10-1-100)

<sup>5</sup> [aihw-australias-welfare-2017-chapter7-2.pdf.aspx](https://www.aic.gov.au/australias-welfare-2017-chapter7-2.pdf.aspx)

<sup>6</sup> [HOS-Ageing-2017\\_V6\\_web.pdf \(acon.org.au\)](https://www.acon.org.au/hos-ageing-2017-v6-web.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [Stop medicalising loneliness – history reveals it's society that needs mending \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/stop-medicalising-loneliness-history-reveals-its-society-that-needs-mending-121111)

Urbanisation has threatened patterns of collective living, as have transformations around the family unit. The demonisation of marginalised groups such as refugees have helped to foster racial divisions. For First Nations people, the ongoing impact of colonisation, violence and brutality is linked to social, cultural and economic divisions. The demonisation of people on income support by the media, and by politicians for political gain, can only contribute to the isolation felt by these people.

Social isolation and loneliness are harmful to our society. For many people, it manifests in poorer mental and physical health, but for some this isolation can be extremely dangerous. The advent of movements based on ‘incel’ or neo-Nazi ideology is strongly associated with feelings of isolation and economic disempowerment. There is a strong argument that to end violent attacks by socially isolated and disempowered individuals, a ‘public health’ approach should be taken to address the feelings of isolation and alienation among incels, white supremacists and other groups vulnerable to violent radicalisation.<sup>8</sup>

### **Preventing social isolation and loneliness**

The evidence base is clear there are factors which cause social isolation and loneliness, and those that protect against it.

Factors which make social isolation and loneliness more likely include living alone, single parenting, disconnection from community, unemployment and a lack of satisfaction with one’s financial situation. In our fast-paced society, many of these factors are daily reality for Australians, and the COVID-19 pandemic has made these more pronounced.

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<https://theconversation.com/incel-violence-is-a-form-of-extremism-its-time-we-treated-it-as-a-security-threat-138536>

Below we discuss some of the key drivers of social isolation and loneliness, as well as recommendations for policies, investment and responses by the Queensland Government, and other levels of government.

### *Housing Security*

The housing crisis in Queensland is a major contributing factor to social isolation and loneliness. Below we discuss the pressures facing people who are homeless, and people who are in insecure housing, and the impacts that insecure housing has on loneliness and isolation.

Australian and international data indicates the prevalence of social isolation and loneliness among people who are homeless. Data suggests that people experiencing homelessness are often separated from family, friends and workmates, and can have precarious relationships among the homeless community. The causes can be complex. For example, people for whom mental illness or disability has been a contributing factor to homelessness, limited support and care options may feed into isolation. Chronic disease may also be a factor, exacerbated by living homeless. There is also evidence suggesting that isolation was exacerbated during the COVID19 pandemic, as many support services closed. The underlying driver of homelessness is financial constraints, and a lack of affordable housing, which in themselves are drivers of isolation and loneliness,

Other research has shown the pressure facing renters, and the ways in which housing insecurity feeds into loneliness and isolation. Older renters, for example, have been found to be particularly at risk of loneliness, in contrast to people living in social housing.<sup>9</sup> For older renters, financial stress and insecurity were key factors contributing to isolation and loneliness. Researchers from UTS<sup>10</sup> write,

*“Many older private renters have little disposable income, because the cost of housing uses up much of their income. They also live with the constant possibility that they may be asked to vacate their accommodation. Their limited budgets mean they often end up living in a poorly located property. These features, individually or in combination, create fertile ground for anxiety and loneliness.”*

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<sup>9</sup> [I really have thought this can't go on': loneliness looms for rising numbers of older private renters \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/)

<sup>10</sup> [I really have thought this can't go on': loneliness looms for rising numbers of older private renters \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/)

In contrast, social housing tenants reported,

*“...strong social ties. Their affordable rent, security of tenure, long-term residence and having neighbours in a similar position meant they could socialise and were not beset by anxiety.”*

In addition, many Australians have little or no connection with neighbours.<sup>11</sup> Factors such as tenants having to regularly move (lease lengths in Queensland are on average around 18 months), hostile urban design, apartments without common areas for casual contact, may contribute to these factors.

As such, universal, secure, affordable housing will need to be at the heart of any evidence-based strategy to improve social isolation and loneliness. This needs to include:

- Overhauling Queensland’s rental system to include caps on rent increases, allowing minor modifications, long-term leases and removing ‘end of a lease’ as grounds for eviction to allow for long-term tenure, banning rent bidding, and allowing people to rent with their pets.
- Significantly increasing investment in social housing across the state. The Greens have proposed the construction of 100,000 public homes over four years, designed with tenant input and to high sustainability standards, and democratic control.
- Introducing 20% inclusionary zoning for new developments in South East Queensland.
- Investing in crisis accommodation, with guidelines of maximum time limits people spend in crisis accommodation before transitioning into to long-term housing.

### *Meaningful Employment*

Paid work is an important safeguard against loneliness, as identified by the AIHW. Economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic must continue to focus on creating meaningful, secure work

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<sup>11</sup> [2017 Psy Week Survey \(psychweek.org.au\)](https://www.psychweek.org.au)

through an investment in manufacturing, public infrastructure and fully funded health and education.

By increasing mining royalties, introducing a levy on the big banks and taxing developers on speculative land value gains, as a state we could afford to:

1. Establish publicly-owned [manufacturing](#) hubs for solar panels, wind turbines and green steel.
2. End the housing crisis, creating 20,248 full-time jobs building 100,000 public homes over four years.
3. Fully fund our [health](#) system, with 6500 more nurses and 3000 more doctors.
4. Ensure genuinely free state [schools](#), fully funding the system with the equivalent of 13,000 extra state school teachers.

These above measures would also have the outcome of creating a robust, universally accessible healthcare sector that could provide support for all Queenslanders, including specialised support for identified vulnerable groups, breaking down identified barriers to access and support. For example, support for new parents, LGBTIQ+ people, young people and people experiencing mental illness.

There are also specific issues around employment facing migrant groups. In Queensland, bridging visa holders are not eligible to access subsidised TAFE or VET programs. I've met with people who are keen to get the skills they need to work, but this ineligibility is a barrier. By making people on bridging visas eligible for these schemes like other visa-holders, and holders of bridging visas in the ACT, New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia, the government could ensure that migrants can get the support and skills they need to participate in the workforce.

### *Welfare and Pensions*

Poverty, unemployment and receiving income support are also key drivers of social isolation and loneliness.<sup>12</sup> International research shows that people on low income, and people who have experienced a negative change in financial status, are more likely to report loneliness and isolation.<sup>13</sup> Far from working in tandem with other government support, Australia's income support framework is punitive, shaming and dysfunctional.

As the Australian Unemployed Workers' Union sets out, 17 jobseekers compete for every job vacancy in Australia. The unemployment benefit, JobSeeker, is well below the poverty line. Thousands of complaints are logged against Centrelink, and job agencies from year to year, and income support recipients have very narrow avenues for resolving these.<sup>14</sup>

There are people on JobSeeker who shouldn't be. Many JobSeeker recipients have significant disability and can't access the Disability Support Pension. For nearly a decade, successive Labor and Coalition governments have kept tens of thousands of single parents off the Single Parent Pension and on JobSeeker.

Overhauling our income support system to be inclusive, fair and appropriate in its operations is beyond the scope of this state parliamentary inquiry, but this cannot be overlooked as a key way to end social isolation and loneliness in Australia. The Greens have been pushing for:

- Raising JobSeeker to at least \$80 a day
- Lifting the Aged Pension and Disability Support Pension
- Suspending mutual obligations.

### *Disability Access and Inclusion*

People with disabilities are more likely to experience loneliness and social isolation than people without disabilities.<sup>15</sup> One study found that this was particularly the case for young people, those in

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<sup>12</sup> [www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/social-isolation-and-loneliness](http://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/social-isolation-and-loneliness)

<sup>13</sup> [Loneliness and Social Isolation in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan: An International Survey \(kff.org\)](https://www.kff.org/2018/07/loneliness-and-social-isolation-in-the-united-states-the-united-kingdom-and-japan-an-international-survey/)

<sup>14</sup> <https://unemployedworkersunion.com/australias-unemployment-crisis/>

<sup>15</sup> [Loneliness, social support, social isolation and wellbeing among working age adults with and without disability: Cross-sectional study \(nih.gov\)](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31111111/)



rental accommodation, racial minorities and people with lower levels of education. Importantly, this research also found that interventions needed to go beyond simply increasing rates of social contact or social support - rather, interventions need to include improving social and economic disadvantage, such as access to secure housing, income and meaningful employment.<sup>16</sup> This intersects with recommendations around boosting welfare and pensions, investing in secure, affordable housing and opportunities for employment.

Discrimination and ableism are also contributing factors. From AIHW research, people with disabilities reported avoiding situations and gatherings, including meeting family and friends, shops, work, public transport, parks, medical appointments and education. This was more pronounced for people with psychosocial disabilities.<sup>17</sup> This is the result of discrimination, lack of access or allowances for participation in public spaces, work or education.<sup>18</sup> To draw on a local example, Brendon Donohue, a young man with vision impairment in South Brisbane, has been campaigning for a pedestrian cross on his street, to allow him safe access to his neighbourhood, something which the Brisbane City Council have failed to deliver.<sup>19</sup> For the Queensland Government, this calls on the need for investment in full accessibility for public spaces, requirements for access in workplaces, medical facilities, schools and universities.

Accessibility is a vital component for an inclusive society, and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) rollout is considered an advance in the ability of Queenslanders with disability to get the support they need. With this in mind, it has recently emerged that a number of Queenslanders, who were previously receiving support from Queensland government Disability Services, are not eligible for the NDIS. As part of the recent budget estimates process, it emerged that 17 of these people, out of 700, are funded for support through the Continuity of Support program. When I asked the Minister for Disability Services about this during estimates<sup>20</sup>, it became clear the government is not tracking the level of support these people have, post the NDIS rollout.

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<sup>16</sup> [Loneliness, social support, social isolation and wellbeing among working age adults with and without disability: Cross-sectional study \(nih.gov\)](#)

<sup>17</sup> [People with disability in Australia 2020 \(aihw.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>18</sup> [People with disability in Australia 2020 \(aihw.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>19</sup> [These Streets aren't made for walking - Westender - West End 4101](#)

<sup>20</sup> [2021\\_08\\_13\\_EstimatesCSC \(parliament.qld.gov.au\)](#)

Given the risks of social isolation and loneliness for people living with disability, it's essential the Queensland government ensures no one is left behind in the wake of the NDIS rollout.

### *Free Public Transport*

Increased public transport use has been linked to reductions in feelings of loneliness, allowing older people to increase participation in volunteering activities and contact with children and friends.<sup>21</sup> Free bus travel is also linked to increased cognition and memory for older people.<sup>22</sup>

A policy for free, reliable and frequent public transport would ensure groups vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness can get around.<sup>23</sup> In Brisbane, free off-peak travel for seniors has seen a 30 per cent rise in ferry and bus use by seniors since introducing the free travel times,<sup>24</sup> suggesting that access and inclusion has been improved for seniors as a result. Queensland would join Luxembourg, Belgium, Germany and Estonia in getting serious about free public transport.

### *Addressing Overwork*

Overwork, and long commutes, can also be a key cause of social isolation. Long, car-based commutes impact on people's ability to spend time in their communities.<sup>25</sup> Conversely, working from home has, in some ways, exacerbated isolation, as people are separated from their workmates.<sup>26</sup> As state-based responses to the COVID-19 pandemic continue to require many people to work from home, a strategy to reduce social isolation and loneliness must take this into account.

The Queensland Greens have called for a trial of the four-day working week, as has been held in other countries like Iceland, Spain and New Zealand. Under the Queensland Greens' proposal, hospital and aged care staff would work four days a week but take home their full pay.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> [How simple policy changes can help us age better and prevent cognitive decline \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/how-simple-policy-changes-can-help-us-age-better-and-prevent-cognitive-decline-12011)

<sup>22</sup> [How simple policy changes can help us age better and prevent cognitive decline \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/how-simple-policy-changes-can-help-us-age-better-and-prevent-cognitive-decline-12011)

<sup>23</sup> <https://greens.org.au/qld/publictransport>

<sup>24</sup> [No free off-peak travel for seniors on Brisbane trains \(brisbanetimes.com.au\)](https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/news/transport/no-free-off-peak-travel-for-seniors-on-brisbane-trains-20191127-p53eom.html)

<sup>25</sup> [Feeling isolated? You're not alone. Here's why 1 in 4 of us is lonely - ABC Everyday](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-08/feeling-isolated-youre-not-alone-heres-why-1-in-4-of-us-is-lonely-abc-everyday/11811112)

<sup>26</sup> [Loneliness rife among Australians working at home - The World Today - ABC Radio](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-08/loneliness-rife-among-australians-working-at-home-abc-radio/11811112)

<sup>27</sup>

<https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/politics/queensland/parliamentary-push-for-four-day-working-week-wit-h-no-loss-of-pay-20191127-p53eom.html>

As the proposal would require facilities to hire more staff to maintain service levels, this proposal would support the other job creation initiatives outlined above. Of course, it would also mitigate against the effects of overwork and stress on Queenslanders' ability to tap into opportunities for leisure and social connection.

Long commutes that reduce the amount of time people can spend with their family and friends should be addressed via investment in fast, free public transport systems, and investment in 100,000 public homes across Queensland, allowing people to live affordably in areas near workplaces.

### *Community Associations*

Engaging in volunteer work and maintaining active memberships of sporting or community organisations is also associated with reduced social isolation. There is so much more we could be doing to ensure a lifelong association with community organisations. Right now, the average cost of club sport in Queensland is \$755 a year. For many parents that's just too much, and children from low-income families are about 50% less likely to do sport out of school.

By raising revenue from the mining, banking and development sectors [we could make club sports free](#) for everyone under 18. By ending the association between socioeconomic status and sporting participation, this small investment could equip young people for a lifetime of involvement in their community. Of course, this model could be replicated across many different age groups and many kinds of community association.

### *Pets*

Pets don't just provide their owners with companionship, they are also linked with increased social contact, facilitating contact with folks in the local area and acting as a trigger for conversations.

Despite this, there are significant barriers to pet ownership in Queensland, and the biggest one comes down to whether you own your home or not. Currently, a tenant can only keep a pet if this is specified in the lease, or if their landlord gives written consent.

When the government consulted on this issue in its *Open Doors to Renting Reform Consultation* in 2018, renters overwhelmingly shared how important their pets are to them. After committing to improve tenants' rights, the government is introducing legislation which still gives lessors broad grounds to refuse tenants' requests to keep a pet.

Queenslanders need [legislation](#) allowing pets to be kept as a basic privilege, to be overturned only on a lessor's application to QCAT, not legislation retaining the lessor's arbitrary right to refuse.

### *Mental Health Services and Support*

Poor access to mental health services and support is a significant contributor to social isolation and loneliness in Queensland. The Queensland Alliance for Mental Health (QAMH) has advocated powerfully on this, reflecting that a full economic recovery needs a mental wellbeing recovery as well.<sup>28</sup>

As QAMH CEO stated in the wake of the 2021-22 Queensland budget, the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely impacted Queenslanders' mental wellbeing, with increasing rates of anxiety and depression. The sector wants to see community-managed not-for-profit mental health services across Queensland funded to support Queenslanders in managing mental illness.

By prioritising mental health services on the same footing as jobs and housing, a strategy against social isolation and loneliness will address the factors which intersect to cause these in Queenslanders' lives.

### *Urban Planning for Inclusion*

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.qamh.org.au/a-full-economic-recovery-needs-a-mental-wellbeing-recovery-too/>

The design of our cities can also foster, or hinder, social connections. There are risks, for example, for children living in medium and high-density housing with limited access to outdoor spaces.<sup>29</sup> Loneliness can also be more acute among people who live in the inner-city.<sup>30</sup>

Rapid and unplanned urban growth is linked to poverty, environmental degradation and population demands that outstrip service capacity.<sup>31</sup> Urbanisation is associated with mental health issues due to increased stressors and reduced social support.<sup>32</sup>

What this suggests is the need for urban planning that prioritises public space, public transport, sustainability and opportunities for connection. Research has shown, for example, that living close to green space is a protective factor against loneliness,<sup>33</sup> providing people with opportunities for casual social connections, enhancing people's mood and interrupting ruminating thoughts.

In Queensland, this could be facilitated via:

- Lifting caps on infrastructure charges so local councils have the resources needed to invest in public infrastructure and greenspace.
- Planning requirements that prioritise common areas, greenspace, sustainable design and affordability.
- Community consultation on planning that prioritises community need and creates opportunities for social connections.

### *Digital Inclusion*

Council of the Ageing Queensland advocates strongly for an evidence-based loneliness and social isolation strategy, in response to the growing international incidence of these.<sup>34</sup> They identify digital inclusion as one way to tackle isolation, and solutions in this vein become even more

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<sup>29</sup>

<sup>30</sup> [Loneliness is a social cancer. every bit as alarming as cancer itself \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/loneliness-is-a-social-cancer-every-bit-as-alarming-as-cancer-itself)

<sup>31</sup>

<https://www.socialconnectedness.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Emma-Harries-Social-Isolation-and-its-Relationship-to-the-Urban-Environment.pdf>

<sup>32</sup>

<sup>33</sup> [People's odds of loneliness could fall by up to half if cities hit 30% green space targets \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/people-s-odds-of-loneliness-could-fall-by-up-to-half-if-cities-hit-30-green-space-targets)

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.cotaqld.org.au/policy-advocacy/social-isolation-loneliness/>

important when lockdowns and home quarantine are a part of daily life for Queenslanders, especially those more vulnerable to COVID-19.

Of course, some older people need to be supported with offline solutions, but many can benefit from digital inclusion. By providing a free internet service for anyone aged over 70, we can ensure that income is not a determinant of whether older people are able to connect online.

Further, by funding services which boost seniors' skills in navigating online spaces and connecting with each other online, we can take the edge off the social isolation that COVID-19 has made more likely for older people.

An example of a low-cost, community based hub for seniors' social connection and development of skills, including navigating online spaces, is the [Indooroopilly Activity Hub](#) or [Brisbane Seniors Online](#). Replicating these models across more regions in Queensland would ensure more seniors can access community spaces, whether in person or via Zoom, and can improve their digital literacy.

Thank you again for conducting this inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland. I look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure Queensland emerges from the COVID-19 crisis as a more connected, inclusive and community-oriented place to live.

Please do not hesitate to contact my office on (07) 3724 9100 if you would like to discuss this matter in more detail.

Kind regards,



Amy MacMahon

Member for South Brisbane