



Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation.

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Introduction

Community Plus+ has been helping people throughout the heart of Brisbane Inner South to feel safer, connected and more in control of their lives for over 30 years.

Our Purpose

Community Plus+ harnesses the strengths, resources and capacities of local people. We include those most marginalised in our local neighbourhoods, in order to increase the wellbeing of all. We are part of creating communities that are more equal, more connected and more empowered. We do this by:

- Connecting the place-based work of C+ to the wider community and the wider community to the work of C+
- Supporting and resourcing people / initiatives in the local community that help build a more equal, connected and empowered community
- Helping to elicit understanding of the local community on social issues; to build the capacity of the community to work towards resolving these issues.

Each part of Community Plus+ provides and promotes active centres for strong communities. We listen, respond and evolve, with the communities we're connected to. We care, we respect and we empower the community. We are proactive and we aim to make a difference. [Annerley Outreach](#), [QSTARS Tenants Advice Service](#), [West End Community House](#) and [Yeronga Community Centre](#) are there for everyone.

We are proud to be active partners with local communities in placemaking, working alongside partners, stakeholders, other agencies and community members to be the ears of the community, and the voice of Brisbane's Inner South.

Our community centres are places of local community participation, belonging, connection and inclusion.

With over 30 years' experience in connecting people at a local level, our model is effective in creating and maintaining social connection and addressing loneliness. We deliver a range of activities by mobilising local social networks including: formal and informal learning, employment skills, social and recreational opportunities and volunteering.

We excel at planning and designing activities in place to build and maintain connections that can be ongoing for the maintenance of social connections once established. Activities are also designed to expand and extend the social connection beyond the operating hours of the community centres.



The key way that we seek to address social isolation and loneliness in Annerley is through the Community Connection & Belonging Project. The project is designed to provide a local, integrated and holistic place-based response to support people experiencing insecure housing and thereby creating a sense of belonging and community. The project is aimed at supporting people experiencing insecure housing with practical needs such as housing, food, access to services and emotional needs to connect, belong, be respected and have purpose and agency in life. The project hosts a Community Lunch every Monday where everybody is welcome to prepare and share a meal together and a Community Lounge on Wednesdays to assist with the practical needs of housing assistance.

The community Connection & Belonging project is about helping people find a home in community and not just four walls. This is about connection and belonging and thus the project takes a place based and community based approach whereby community connectors walk alongside people experiencing insecure housing to assist with the practical needs but most importantly the emotional needs of friendship, connection and belonging. The starting point for this is through the weekly Community Lunch held every Monday whereby thirty to forty people regularly attend. The main groups attending this lunch are people experiencing insecure housing, seniors and CALD as well as those who are more resourced in community that can support and walk alongside others. Some of the statements made by people are;

Social Isolation in the Area

The Community Connection & Belonging Project was developed in response to an increase in homelessness in Annerley and surrounding suburbs reflecting the Brisbane experience of homelessness moving to the suburbs (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, 2019). Australian Bureau of Statistics a of 2018, shows there are 359 people who are homeless in the Annerley, Yeronga, Fairfield, Moorooka, Rocklea. Hidden homelessness and at risk of homelessness is not reflected in these numbers.

Whilst, emergency responses meet immediate needs they do not break the homelessness cycle or assist people to connect, belong and find and create a 'home'. The project model is evidence based and uses best practice approaches, whereby housing is a fundamental human right, vital for organising one's own life, experiencing participation and becoming part of the environment (Housing First, 2019). That is, homelessness impacts on more than the right to housing but an exclusion from community life erodes health, wellbeing and quality of life.

The project recognises that addressing homelessness doesn't just require finding someone physical accommodation but hope, purpose, and belonging are essential. (The Power of Giving Homeless People a Place to Belong, 2018)

Approach to social isolation and loneliness

In Annerley, the approach to loneliness and social isolation is through the Community Connection & Belonging Project which is a place based and community based approach to create belonging. There is a weekly community lunch that provides the space for people to connect and form friendships. The project enlists the assistance of community members as volunteer 'community connectors' who are intentionally befriending, supporting and walking alongside people to assist with housing stress and other challenges.

Example of connection are;

- A community lunch attendee who has recently found permanent housing for the first time in a long time helped another lunch attendee move house._
- A community connector attended private rental viewings and pre-filled out the application form to assist in securing the rental

- A community connector has assisted a couple with cleaning up their house to assist in their goal of their children returned to them from foster care.
- Community connectors regularly assist people to get to appointments with Dept of Housing, Centrelink, rental appointments etc

The project has been implemented in the last six months and a recent qualitative evaluation has identified 'purpose' and 'connection' as key themes that emerged from people's stories. There were many positive statements from participants and community connectors about 'friendship', 'strong connection' 'like family', 'received practical assistance'. To sum this up, one participant stated the following;

"I am not lonely here. There's always someone to talk to like family. I have companionship despite my housing stress."

This approach is reducing social isolation for volunteers (community connectors) as well as reflected by this quote

"I am absolutely delighted to be in community."

"I am desperate to be involved. I've got to be here."

"My fiancé is overseas because of COVID. This lunch fills this space for me."

"I have decided to move [closer]... because things have fitted together and doesn't work well with me doing nothing."

"I am just delighted to know you. My mental health as a 76year old is helped through having purpose... while I am blessed with health, I need to have something to do. 'I will do anything I can do here'."

An effective initiative:

The Community Connection & Belonging Project has been operating as part of the Annerley Community Service for six months. An initial evaluation of the project has recently been conducted with the following quotes demonstrating the practical and emotional support provided through the project and the experience of friendship, connection and belonging comes through strongly indicating a strong link to reduced social isolation.

Person A

"My neighbour saw changes in me quickly ... I am able to make friends through this community" (who can point out his personal growth)

"I have felt people genuinely care and listen" and "at a very low point, I had someone to check on me"

Person R

I came because I was grieving. I stayed because I was invited to be a volunteer and I was receiving support. I have taken on new skills, including cooking, I am so happy! I am involved as a volunteer and still get support

Peron J

"This was a great place – we made great friends and we still come back ...".

"This was our turning point. It gave us a new life. We feel so blessed to link up in this community and receive this assistance. We feel strong connection and sense of gratitude here."

Person D

"This feels like family." "I think I've found myself here."

"I have a good sense of myself. I gave space to achieve my goals and work towards what is better for me. I don't have to gather and party. I have better peer networks that help make better choices, like less drinking."

Person S

"I am not lonely here. There's always someone to talk to like family"

"I have companionship despite my housing stress"

"I am learning and able to save money here. I am living and saving. I am very happy. My spending is in control. I look forward to having the ability to go home with some savings. Jumping into the apprenticeship kept me going and busy and that was good".



In 2011, the suburb of Yeronga was badly affected by flooding, with over 5000 people directly impacted. With no existing community centre in place, the Yeronga Flood Recovery Centre was established by community volunteers to support flood-affected residents to connect, rest and refresh, and to coordinate recovery efforts and supports.

Melinda, volunteer flood recovery centre coordinator, now lead Community Development worker at Yeronga Community Centre, recalls; “We used to call ourselves the Hub. People would come in and tell us – their community - what they needed, and the Hub volunteers would find people and organisations who had the time, effort, goods, compassion and/or willingness to help”. The role of the centre in identifying and responding to local level needs was critical, and responding to social isolation and loneliness amidst disaster and its aftermath was a core component of this need. One “floodie”, as residents affected by the disaster call themselves, reflects that, “I got heaps from the centre with regards to support and friendship. I got peace of mind.... [community volunteers] came and sat with me and listened. I liked talking to everyone and not always about the flood. The centre was my place of solace.

Initially a short-term response, the critical role of the Centre in providing community members with a sense of belonging and connection quickly became apparent. The community successfully lobbied for funding to open a permanent neighbourhood centre, with Yeronga Community Centre emerging out of the floodwater. Ten years later, social connections and friendships forged out of the floods remain a core part of the Community Centre. This is evident in that many of the original community flood recovery volunteers and “floodies” have played a key role in the COVID-19 response that Yeronga Community Centre developed to support socially isolated and vulnerable residents.

The centre continues to connect community members with social, programs, projects and activities with the centre and subsequently with each other. The centre provides connecting activities weekly, monthly and quarterly such as Seniors Group, Art Group, Community Breakfast, Food with Thought Cooking Program, Computer Assistance and Excursions. The Community Breakfast is held weekly each Wednesday and is aimed at supporting people in our community who may be isolated or lonely, to connect over breakfast, which is provided free of charge. The breakfast provides a safe and inclusive place for community members to share a meal, connect, share stories, have a place to feel like they belong and also for volunteers, who are lonely or socially isolated to volunteer and connect with other volunteers, share their skills and feel like they needed and wanted.

The Programs and Projects at Yeronga Community Centre are provided to assist and provide social connectedness and belonging in the community. As a result of Covid 19 we have strived to maintain social connection through technology assistance and outreach during lock-down phases. Some examples:

- **Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Group:** Spanish Speaking Womens Craft Group meet at the centre weekly, each week providing space for the women to gather together and share their love of their native language, craft, food and connecting with people from various backgrounds, suburbs and ages in a safe and inclusive environment. The group travels from over 8 different postcodes to attend the centre and connect with each other. During COVID this group set up a phone tag system to ensure that they stayed connected during the time they were unable to meet in person.

- **SENIORS:** weekly group attended by seniors from the local area, to connect, socialise, share and learn skills and be active members of the community. The Seniors Group also provides excursions which are coordinated quarterly to explore Brisbane and surrounding areas. The excursions are open to all over 50's at Yeronga Community Centre including participants from Annerley Community Hub and is open to the community through advertising and promotion. The Excursions have connected various community members with each other and friendships have been established through the connection of the Seniors Programs. Many of our members of our seniors program attend the 2 for 1 dinner at a local club each Tuesday night to share the cost of a meal and socialise outside the centre, continuing the social connectedness outside the centre. J: I love coming here. I always feel welcome and have made new friends who love to play cards. It's a home away from home. Bruce and I have a great rivalry playing cards at the centre.
- **ART GROUP:** weekly group supported by a volunteer art facilitator. The group is of various ages, abilities demographics, including social housing residents and migrants, who gather together to share their love of art, to learn new skills and connect with others with a similar interest. The group shares their art and encourages each other to expand and enhance their skills in an inclusive and encouraging environment. The group connects each week with each other over their art and love of art, many of our art group live alone and some live with life threatening illnesses. The group is encouraging of each other and check in on each other when they are not able to attend. One participant has been socially isolated due to mental health issues and others of the group check on her daily to ensure that she is ok and that they are there for her. Many of group had never painted before and are encouraged to expand and exhibit their art work at exhibitions and also on social media. We continue to hear positive feedback from participants that Thursday Art Group is the highlight of their week, connecting, sharing morning tea and loving art with others. R (facilitator) The centre provides many services to those who are in need. I am proud to be a small part of what is a great endeavour. The art group is intensely involved in their work and I am delighted to find myself working in a community centre. Sharing the love of art with people from all backgrounds and ages.
- **SOCIAL HOUSING:** Yeronga Community Centre has connected with and supported social housing residents in our community since the beginning of the centre. Each day at the centre, we have social housing residents attend to connect, receive assistance and have conversation with staff, students, volunteers and other community members. Since March 2020, in response to COVID and food insecurity, we have connected more with social housing residents. Many local boarding house residents, visit the centre each day to connect with staff, volunteers and other local community members in communal spaces and activities.
- **Community Breakfast Program** a weekly occurrence, connects community members together in a safe and inclusive environment, sharing a meal and building a sense of belonging with each meal. The breakfast provides volunteer opportunities to community members who are isolated and want to feel the sense of belonging and being needed. Many of our volunteers live alone and tell us that the volunteer opportunities that are provided to them is life changing and their sense of belonging in a community (where many have been placed in this community, due to social housing availability) is increased due to knowing other members of the community.

Person M a volunteer, male aged over 60 with chronic illness, migrated to Australia in the 1990's, says that before he found the centre he was lost and lonely, feeling like life was just passing by. M now says that the centre has given him a life worth living, he has made friends that he catches up with for coffee and meals and that he has a sense of belonging and that when he goes to the shop, many stop and say hi and know who he is. M sent texts and emails during August 2021 COVID lockdown stating "That staying sane is more and more a big challenge during the lockdown. Let's hope the centre is open next week because I miss you all".



West End Community House (WECH) has been welcoming, connecting and supporting community members for over 32 years across the Kurilpa area of Brisbane. WECH is visited daily by people experiencing disadvantage due to family and significant relationship breakdown, and seeking support in various forms including housing application/referral, moral support and food.

Backed by local community experience and knowledge, WECH runs activities which encourage people in the community to engage with each other and the centre and foster productive and positive interaction between community members.

These activities include:

- R.I.S.E Sessions run Monday to Thursday mornings to provide connection and support
- Kiosk Activation in People's Park Boundary St West End to provide access and entertainment
- Community Brekky to provide community, sustenance and connection
- Art Gang which is also run at no cost to the participants and provides belonging, art guidance and uplifting connection

Social Isolation in the West End area of Brisbane

The West End area was for many decades a place with a significant number of factories and affordable boarding house accommodation, but with ongoing development, a number of high-rise apartment blocks have gone up which are too expensive for many long-term residents of the area. This development was ramped up to a higher speed in the 1980's with the Expo 88 works that took place, and in the last 10 years from about 2010, the West End area has been targeted for development due to its proximity to the Brisbane CBD. One thing that is held in common for people living in apartment blocks and boarding houses is that they are living alone and do not have social connection through employment.

Some vulnerable groups are people who are:

- over 50 years of age
- from CALD backgrounds
- separated from their families
- Sleeping rough or in boarding houses

Covid19 restrictions have torn apart many relationships that community members had built up from spending time together here at their neighbourhood centre. One example is the computer room which used to be filled with people who did not have internet access at home or on a mobile device. There was a regular group, mainly men, who would normally be by themselves at home, but were able to connect at WECH and share experience and support for each other in a beautiful way.

Keys to our approach to Loneliness and Isolation are Inclusion and Welcoming. When people visit West End Community House they are welcomed with the offer of a cuppa and a chat. Our volunteers and staff are generous

with their time - there's always someone available for a good chat and that connection without agenda is so important for someone who is isolated or feeling lonely.

Our weekly activities also demonstrate our approach. Every Wednesday we activate the People's Park with music and inclusive activities for one and all. On Thursdays we provide a free community breakfast run by volunteers. On Fridays our Art Gang is a special space where people who would otherwise be marginalised, are engaged as artists in a friendly, lively art session.

Our R.I.S.E. Sessions provide further opportunities for Welcoming and Inclusion. They are 2 hours sessions run Monday to Thursday where we welcome anyone in and offer people localised knowledge, food support, free wifi, and local service information and referral.

[another key is soft entry and engagement with no agenda. When a person approaches our centre, we are ready to listen and help as first actions – there's no need for paperwork and we don't have a quota to fill. That allows for genuineness to shine through and people value that.]

West End Community House

The West End Community House runs activities that provide great opportunity for socialising and developing social skills, including the previously mentioned:

- Kiosk Activation
- Community Breakfast
- Art Gang
- R.I.S.E Sessions
- Women's Group
- Men's BBQ
- Computer Support

Volunteering is also a significant aspect in reducing loneliness and social isolation for many people in our community. West End Community House has on average 25 volunteers a week giving a total of 100 hours of labour across 2 sites in the area. In the QFCA survey in 2020, WECH notes that 130 people each week visited the centre to be part of an activity or event. Overall, our centre produced an estimated \$448,475 worth of value and this works out to \$3.29 for every \$1 of Queensland Government funding.

Conclusion

In considering how to reduce loneliness and social isolation in Queensland, the Queensland Government needs to adequately resource centres as the key pieces of social infrastructure they are, to reduce loneliness and social isolation. By doing this, the Queensland Government will be taking the opportunity to invest in citizen-led, place-based solutions to the problem of loneliness and social isolation in our communities. Token solutions to loneliness and social isolation by "cookie cutting" more social groups across the state is a low-quality option when compared to what place-based community centres can provide and it would not address this epidemic. Local communities are ready and willing to be empowered, through the infrastructure of local Neighbourhood Centres, to unite and solve these social issues together. Each community has its own nuances and issues evidenced through WECH's Art Gang, Kiosk Activation and Community Breakfasts, and each community can use their resources with the right guidance and investment through Queensland's Neighbourhood Centres.

The 2021 National Neighbourhood Centre Week's motto is so fitting for the times, "Loneliness - The solution is community". And the reason community is the solution for loneliness and social isolation is because that place-based, local support delivered through neighbourhood centre infrastructure by a broad range of local people who share the same streets, shops, transport, restaurants, libraries and community centres carries so much weight and validity. And you just can't get that anywhere.