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Committee Secretary
Community Support and Services Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Qld 4000
By email to: CSSC@parliament.qld.gov.au

Dear Chair and Committee Members

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland

This submission is made on behalf of Brisbane Residents United, Brisbane's peak body for community resident actions groups. Whose purpose is to:

- Represent Brisbane and surrounding district residents and provide them with a united voice Governments on matters pertaining to urban planning and development.
- Act as a resource centre, facilitating information sharing across established and start-up local resident associations.

Social isolation and loneliness are caused by many factors of the modern lifestyle. They are a problem that is exacerbated by the way we plan our cities and our communities. They are a reflection of the trend for populations to move from smaller country centres to larger cities and the increasing urbanisation of those cities. People may no longer have close connections with their neighbours nor the time or inclination to become involved in community organisations. There are limited opportunities to create social connections outside of work, schools or organised social groups.

Hugh MacKay in his article *Kindness: A Cure for Loneliness?* Written for *Ending Loneliness Together* on 19 August 2021 observed

“Far from becoming more conscious of our interdependence and interconnectedness, we have become more defiant about our sense of independence, our individual differences and our uniqueness.

A quick reminder of some of those trends:

- the fastest-growing household type is the single-person household, and our households are shrinking to the point where more than 25 percent of Australian households now contain only one person. Not all solo householders are lonely or socially isolated, of course, but the risk of increased social isolation is heightened by this trend;*
- between 35 and 40 percent of contemporary marriages will end in divorce, with socially disruptive consequences for the couples, their families and social circles;*
- the falling birth rate means the ‘social lubricant’ effect of kids in a neighbourhood is in shorter supply than ever: relative to total population, we are currently producing our smallest-ever generation of children (often preferring pets to children – there are currently 25 million humans and 28 million pets in Australia);*
- we’re more mobile than ever, moving house on average once every six years, and more mobile in another sense, too: with almost universal car ownership, there’s been a dramatic reduction in suburban footpath traffic that encourages incidental neighbourly encounters;*
- we’re busier than ever, having elevated busyness to the status of a social virtue – though busyness is the great enemy of social cohesion;*
- the information technology revolution has had a paradoxical effect – making us more ‘connected’ than ever before, but also making it easier for us to stay apart, and to sacrifice too much face-to-face time in favour of screen time (‘connected but lonely’ is a phenomenon now observable in heavy users of social media).*

Even that short list is enough to alert us to the cumulative effect of such trends: more fragmentation, less cohesion, more social isolation. And because we belong to a social species, these trends are producing the predictable effect: the rise of the Me Culture (exemplified in our current obsession with ‘identity’) and the three epidemics that inevitably follow the atomisation of a society: loneliness, anxiety, depression.”

<https://endingloneliness.com.au/kindness-a-cure-for-loneliness/>

It is important that we begin to tackle social isolation and loneliness because the rewards for our society are many while the costs for ignoring these issues are immense. Governments tend to see spending on hard infrastructure as contributing to grow and societal well being while spending on social infrastructure is regarded as nice

to have but not necessarily essential. This is reflected in both the budget allocations and influence of the responsible government departments. It would be difficult to argue that the Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy has either the budget or the influence of the Department of Transport and Main Roads.

Indeed this was starkly illustrated by the cuts to arts organisations and many small community organisations that were made by the Newman government in 2012. The Government funding given to these organisations, in many cases for front line community assistance programs, was often leveraged by volunteers to create far more value to the community than would otherwise be possible. Many of these organisations folded. They were seen as totally expendable by the government despite the valuable community work they did and the social networks they supported.

We will address the committee's terms of reference in order.

1. **the nature and extent of the impact of social isolation and loneliness in Queensland, including but not limited to:**
 - a. **identification of and consultation with vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals or groups at significant risk across the life course**

Loneliness affects all of us from time to time. Mostly it is a temporary state, but for some people loneliness lingers – and may even become the norm. Research conducted for the Australia Institute in 2005 reported that about 16% of men and women aged 25-44 agreed with the statement “I often feel very lonely”. The deepest levels of loneliness appeared to be experienced by men aged 35-44 and by women over 75. (Flood, M: [Mapping Loneliness in Australia, Australia Institute, 2005, p10-11](https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/DP76_8.pdf)) https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/DP76_8.pdf

A recent report by Vic Health identifies loneliness as a public health problem affecting two groups in particular: young people aged 15-25 and people older than 75. <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/letter/articles/vh-letter-47-loneliness>

Similar studies in the UK have suggested that around 5 – 16% of people over 65 report feeling lonely all or most of the time. (Campaign to End Loneliness: [Measuring Your Impact on Loneliness in Later Life, nd, p9](https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/Loneliness-Measurement-Guidance1.pdf)) <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/Loneliness-Measurement-Guidance1.pdf> The implications of loneliness for older people are significant. Feeling lonely has been linked to the risk of an earlier death, depression, dementia and poor self-reported health. (ibid, p5)

We have recently been engaged in a community asset mapping exercise run by Social Inclusion Project Inner West.

During that process some of the groups that were identified in the community who display concerns about isolation and loneliness fall into the following categories:

- People who are dependent on income support through government programs

- People who have been the subject of domestic violence and are now separated emotionally and geographically from their families and loved ones
- People with disabilities, especially mental health issues, who have great difficulty navigating administrative systems
- University students, particularly those from country areas or overseas. International students have been disproportionately affected by Covid 19.
- The elderly
- People living alone

b. the interplay of COVID-19 with this issue

COVID-19 in many cases exacerbated the social isolation and loneliness of these groups.

2. the causes and drivers of social isolation and loneliness, including those unique to Queensland

Central to feelings of loneliness is a sense of disconnection from significant individuals and broader social networks. Many people are very likely to experience the kind of social dislocation that can result in their losing touch with key social contacts. They can experience this in many ways:

- The transition to retirement
- Re-location to a new town or city
- Re-location from farm to town
- Downsizing
- Illness/disability of self, partner or friends
- Death of partner or friends
- Living alone
- Financial pressures
- Lack of family nearby
- Release after incarceration
- General limitations of physical and mental capacity due to age.

Queensland is often referred to by the Southern States as "gods waiting room" due to the large number of people who retire here to enjoy the warmer climate and more relaxed lifestyle. It is also the most decentralised state in the country. These actually bring additional challenges for Government to be able to deal with these issues.

The following reports may be of assistance:

2020 The Ending Loneliness White Paper (Ending Loneliness Together) and the 2018 Australian Loneliness Report (Australian psychological Society <https://endingloneliness.com.au/resources/#research>)

2019 The Young Australian Loneliness Survey (Victoria) <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/loneliness-survey>

The 2019 Friends for Good survey <https://friendsforgood.org.au/assets/downloads/FriendsForGood-ResearchReport-TimeWeTalked.pdf>

Regarding measurement – see Ending Loneliness Together’s Guide to Measuring Loneliness For Community Organisations June 2021

3. the protective factors known to mitigate social isolation and loneliness

The formation of a community that works together on a common goal. A good example of this would be the Urban Food Street at Buderim.

“Founded in 2009 by architect Caroline Kemp and horticulturist Duncan McNaught to “push the boundaries of suburban living by redefining the traditional role of the residential street,” the Urban Food Street precinct spans an impressive 11 streets and is the only neighborhood in Australia in which residents are encouraged to grow large quantities of organic fruits, vegetables and herbs along the edge of the road. Just think of it as an Aussie take on guerrilla gardener Ron Finley’s [beautiful, community-bettering edible gardens](#) that have blossomed in South Los Angeles, but at a much larger scale.

Buderim’s meant-to-be-replicable Urban Food Street — showcased in all of its leafy splendor in the video below — isn’t simply about growing hyper-local greens where fresh produce is seldom found. Rather, it’s “about creating suburban streets for people to live in that are socially active and engaged, environmentally sustainable, climatically comfortable and aesthetically and functionally rewarding. Streets that promote optimal health and wellbeing in the suburban context by making the act of daily living healthier. Put simply, Urban Food Street is a proven project model for growing suburban neighbourhoods that people love to live in.”

<https://www.treehugger.com/australia-sunshine-coast-council-destroys-fruit-trees-4866787>

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-05-31/urban-food-street-trees-culled-sunshine-coast/8576700>

This is an example of a community lead initiative of the type that needs to be encouraged by Government but not necessarily instigated or controlled by it. Indeed heavy handed local council intervention almost derailed this community project. This community initiative had both planned and totally unexpected payoffs for their community. It actually connected people in the neighbourhood in many different ways.

An elderly man living alone had a pool in his back garden that he then began to share with his neighbours. They in turn looked out for him and supported him in numerous ways. He had been lonely after his wife died and his involvement in the community garden meant he became a valued member of the community who felt he was contributing and part of the neighbourhood. He connected with neighbours he had never met before and felt safer and happier. His health and mental outlook were improved.

4. the benefits of addressing social isolation and loneliness, examples of successful initiatives undertaken nationally and internationally and how to measure social isolation and loneliness in Queensland to determine if implemented strategies are effective

Use some of the excellent expertise that has already been developed in our own State. Health costs all around the world are skyrocketing and the COVID-19 experience should have taught us the value of cohesive communities.

Governments tend to look at budgets in silos as departmental budgets. This is short sighted and does nothing to account for expenditure in one department that may lead to savings in another. The costs of servicing mental health and issues presented by an ageing population are enormous and growing. Budgets for community services are always seen as nice to have but not essential. This needs to change. Expenditure in one area will lead to multiples of savings in another and a decrease in the overall costs.

From an article “Scaffolding a Stronger Society” by Catherine Haslam from the School of Psychology, University of Queensland c.haslam@uq.edu.au
in The Psychologist May 2018

“Social isolation touches all our lives and knows no bounds. It affects the young and old, the rich and poor, and those who are in good and ill health. It also places huge pressures on health services – estimates suggest that around 10 per cent of adults suffer from its debilitating consequences, and that GPs spend around 20 per cent of their time dealing with non-health problems with two thirds of their clients raising issues of social isolation (Caper & Plunkett, 2015)

The experience of social isolation and disconnection is common across a range of health conditions and contexts. It is a consequence, for example, of social disadvantage, mental health difficulties, addiction, pain, brain injury, trauma and ageing. At a time when people need them the most, social isolation robs them of the resources that flow from belonging to social groups. This is because social group belonging – and the sense of internalised social identity that this provides – has been shown to be a key source of self-esteem, feelings of control, access to social support, and a sense of purpose and meaning. As we see it then, social identity capital is the key outcome that interventions to tackle social isolation need to deliver.

The G4H programme is structured around five modules:

- *Schooling:* Raising awareness of the value of groups for health and of ways to harness this.
- *Scoping:* Developing social maps to identify existing connections and areas for social growth.

- *Sourcing*: Training skills to maintain and utilise existing networks and reconnect with valued groups.
- *Scaffolding*: Using the group as a platform for new social connections and to train effective engagement.
- *Sustaining*: Reinforcing key messages and troubleshooting (held one month later as a booster session). “

[The Psychologist_May 2018A.pdf](#)

There are also savings to be made by tapping into community networks that allow people to support one another in informal ways.

We would like to commend a successful initiative that we have been involved with. Here is information about that initiative from John Scoble the facilitator of the project:

The Social Inclusion Project Inner West was launched in February 2020. It exists to reduce social isolation in the suburbs of St Lucia, Toowong, Taringa and Indooroopilly, by:

- *Networking, information sharing and collaborative effort among members*
- *Creating spaces and opportunities for people to meet and strengthen relationships*
- *Identifying assets and resources in the local area and the level of association/ connection between them, and building upon these to create a strengthened network*
- *Enabling key people within our community, well informed about the options available, to become catalysts for referral of the socially isolated and lonely.*
- *Evaluating the effectiveness of our project, at least annually*

During the second quarter 2021, we conducted three asset mapping workshops aimed at both developing close relationships and documenting the many varied activities which could be built upon to achieve our objectives. The network has contact with approximately 140 people representing about 60 organisations within the community.

Within the Social Inclusion Project Inner West, a subgroup is examining how we can leverage key people in the community who are “connectors”, such as general practitioners, accountants, hairdressers and real estate agents.

This is an interesting initiative that we believe could valuably be repeated in many areas around the city and indeed the state.

- 5. how current investment by the Queensland Government, other levels of government, the non-government, corporate and other sectors may be leveraged to prevent, mitigate and address the drivers and impacts of social isolation and loneliness across Queensland, including:**
- a. services and programs such as health and mental health, transport, housing, education, employment and training, sport and recreation, community services and facilities, digital inclusion, volunteering, the arts and culture, community development, and planning for accessible, inclusive and connected communities**

There is a reasonable amount of activity through government, corporations, NFPs and individuals directed at addressing social isolation and loneliness. Unfortunately these efforts are often blinkered and silo'd. This results in:

- duplication of effort
- a lack of collaboration and the synergy that comes from this
- lack of knowledge of services available to meet the specific need being addressed at any time
- sub-optimal outcomes for the socially isolated, lonely, vulnerable and disadvantaged

investment by the Queensland government could be directed towards information sharing, development of local networks, including community centres, and public education about services. We would advocate strongly for locally focused, community led and government supported activities.

b. targeted support to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and those most at risk

From the Hilda Report we know that there are more 55-64 (65%) on Newstart than those aged 25 to 34 and 26% of older Australians experience poverty. Brisbane is the second most expensive city in which to live in Australia. We believe there are a lot of asset rich expenditure poor people living in the older group in various areas in the city. Disadvantaged groups are not always easily identifiable nor are they necessarily living together in areas that are readily perceived as disadvantaged.

We would also mention that older women are a group that are increasingly featuring in statistics of disadvantaged groups. A lot of elderly women need to feel safe and welcomed to confidently enjoy external activities.

6. the role, scope and priorities of a state-wide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness, considering interactions with existing Queensland and national strategies.

Urban Food Street is an example of an organisation that can be used as a way of leveraging organisations that presently exist to create a real feeling of community in an area. Government cannot create a sense of community but it can assist by providing help when community organisations request it. Community lead initiatives need to be supported by Government in ways that will be determined by those individual communities.

The social and health problems associated with loneliness are now well recognised. Local, community driven organisations, such as Urban Food Street, offer an effective and low cost solution to some of these problems. By providing modest levels of support for community organisations and community hubs significant savings in other areas, notably physical and mental health, are possible.

The priorities of a statewide strategy should be to treat the causes rather than the symptoms of social isolation and loneliness, through support for community organisations or where appropriate, direct government action.

We reference for your information the Ending Loneliness White Paper <https://endingloneliness.com.au/resources/#research> .

We reference a TED talk by Johann Hari. He points to the loss of connections (with self, others, meaning and purpose, the natural world etc.) as the key reason for the rise in mental health – particularly mood disorders like anxiety and depression. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MB5IX-np5fE>

An article from the Stanford Social Innovation Review on “collective impact”. See https://ssir.org/articles/entry/social_progress_through_collective_impact#

Should you require any further information I can be contacted on 

We would appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Committee at the Public Hearing.

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Handley

President

The Brisbane Residents United Inc Steering Group