




Speech By
Robert Skelton

MEMBER FOR NICKLIN

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COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND SERVICES COMMITTEE

Report, Motion to Take Note

 **Mr SKELTON** (Nicklin—ALP) (3.39 pm): I rise to speak on the Community Support and Services Committee's report into social isolation and loneliness. I concur with the previous speakers who have spoken about how important and eye-opening this inquiry was and what a privilege it was to be a part of it. I thank the chair, the deputy chair and the other committee members. I thank the minister, the government departments, the state bodies, the community organisations, the academics and all the members of the public for their invaluable contributions to our investigation of the nature and extent of the impact of social isolation and loneliness experienced in Queensland.

Through the inquiry the committee found that social isolation and loneliness, while related, are not the same. Loneliness has been defined as an aversive and subjective feeling of social isolation that occurs when a person perceives that the quality or quantity of their social relationships is less than what they desire. Research has found that lonely people feel that their relationships are not meaningful and they are not understood by others. According to Relationships Australia, 'social isolation', 'social connection' and 'loneliness' are often used interchangeably although it is well understood that they capture highly related but distinct concepts. As such, the committee has recommended that the Queensland government clearly defines 'social isolation' and 'loneliness' to create a common discourse and ensure consistent language to enhance the understanding of these issues across Queensland and to support appropriate policy responses.

The committee found that there is a high prevalence of social isolation and loneliness within Queensland. Through site visits to some of the 127 community centres around the state, we saw the fantastic work of social workers, social work students, link workers, volunteers and students on work placements in tackling this issue. To support the important work of neighbourhood and community centres, the committee recommends the establishment of a network of frontline professionals involved in preventing and responding to social isolation and loneliness. It also recommends that the Queensland government explore more opportunities to place work students in neighbourhood and community centres across Queensland to build the capacity of workers while nurturing university partnerships.

To ensure neighbourhood and community centres have the resources they need, the committee recommends the government review the funding model for neighbourhood centres across Queensland, including a consideration of measures to help stabilise the workforce, retain corporate knowledge and help ensure centres are best positioned to meet the emerging needs of their communities. I thank Chris Mundy from Neighbourhood Centres Queensland for providing my office with a bit more information.

The committee found that social isolation and loneliness is not an issue unique to Queensland and many other jurisdictions are taking action to reduce the lack of social connection in their communities. As such, the committee recommends the government reflect on the work and the research in other jurisdictions to identify best practice in addressing social isolation and loneliness, with a view to it being adopted here.

One method of treating social isolation and loneliness in other jurisdictions is social prescribing, which is outlined by the Australian Association of Social Workers as a practice where health professionals, including GPs, have the resources and infrastructure to link patients with social services or even social groups in a bid to address the social determinants contributing to poor health and stave off the epidemic of loneliness and social isolation. One example of that, as spoken about by the member for Mansfield, is the Ways to Wellness program. Since that pilot began in 2019, over 300 individuals have been connected to groups, activities, social and sporting clubs, volunteering opportunities, training and employment while building a network of link workers. Due to the success of the program, the committee recommends that the Queensland government consider partnering with other levels of government to implement a statewide trial of that model.

Other recommendations include finding an effective measure of social isolation to help direct funding where it is needed; advocating the Commonwealth for more primary health network nurses; advocating council for green space and social infrastructure; the development of online training and induction opportunities for volunteers to contribute to programs aimed at preventing and responding to social isolation and loneliness; government investigate opportunities to co-locate state and Commonwealth organisations and NGOs to improve efficiency and access; government consider a consistent approach to support place-based responses; and government develop a 10-year plan. On a personal level, it was found that one in four Queenslanders is affected by both or either of these issues and I would contend that that is a snapshot of the time right now. These issues have or will affect all Queenslanders at some point in their lifetimes. I thank all who have informed this report.