



Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Record of Proceedings, 31 March 2022

COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND SERVICES COMMITTEE

Report, Motion to Take Note

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (3.23 pm): At the outset I want to say that in this place after a decade members get to do some inquiries which they start with apprehension but end up being very fulfilling and rewarding. I want to put on the record that the social isolation and loneliness inquiry was one of those. We should accept the evidence that social isolation and loneliness impact on health outcomes, quality of life and mortality. I did feel that the committee became acutely aware of the significant social isolation and loneliness experienced in our communities, most notably by the disadvantaged and vulnerable. We have witnessed an increase in social isolation and loneliness during the COVID-19 outbreak and the committee heard that there has been a significant impact on people in the community, particularly those with pre-existing health conditions and limited support networks including the elderly or those from low socio-economic or vulnerable backgrounds.

After receiving nearly 200 submissions and doing extensive travel for hearings, which were very well attended, there are many serious issues that exist. The committee heard that the association between social isolation and the built form and design of our communities is important. The fact is that as a whole society local, federal and state governments have a role to play in things like civic participation, use of public spaces, access and safety for women and girls, particularly in our communities, and people with disability. We all have a role to play to make sure that our communities are more cognisant of these issues. Transport stops underpin mobility, people's behaviour and, more importantly, safety. Social isolation and loneliness are detrimental to both physical and mental health, leading to terrible adverse effects in our communities. We heard that these things were viewed as both a potential cause and a consequence of mental illness according to a report by the Productivity Commission in 2020. We were given information that addressing this is critical for improving the mental health and wellbeing of everyone and that the community mental health sector has a role to play.

I want to discuss the Laidley Community Centre, which is one of 140 neighbourhood and community centres around Queensland responding to loneliness and social isolation in our community. Neighbourhood centres are place based social infrastructure that foster connection, belonging, participation and inclusion. 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 or disenfranchised.

Alana Wahl, the manager of the Laidley Community Centre, impressed with her presentation. This centre supports the Queensland Families and Communities Association's submission, the peak body of neighbourhood centres. Overwhelmingly there was a consistent message of trying to increase investment to get more workers into neighbourhood centres, as well as to help cover overhead costs; strength based awareness campaigns emphasising the role of these centres, creating increased awareness of centres as hubs of socially isolated individuals; and enhancing neighbourhood centres'

digital and physical infrastructure to connect isolated communities and individuals using hybrid online and in-person methods. The association also talked about the reporting frameworks, which were something that I found interesting.

I want to give a shout-out to all of those neighbourhood centres that we visited. They are such a passionate bunch of people doing amazing work and they are a resource. The Queensland government has put some extra capacity in those organisations already out of one of the recommendations, and funding is the best thing we could give towards these community-led, place based solutions in our communities. I also want to give a shout-out for the neighbourhood centre at Agnes Water. It has been trying to get a more permanent stature and its funding has increased as well, and we would love to see a purpose-built facility for that community.

The committee heard submissions that for over 25 years neighbourhood centres have been providing homelessness services here in Brisbane and they know firsthand how homelessness, health, inequality, poverty, intergenerational trauma and interpersonal violence and abuse from partners are disconnecting people from services and family. We know that this disconnection forces individuals and families into homelessness, creates barriers to employment and on it goes. I again give a big shout-out to our neighbourhood centres and all committee members.

As I said at the beginning, my time on this inquiry in particular was a most rewarding time and I am glad that this House has shone a light on this issue. I was a bit sceptical to start with, but as time went on we met wonderful Queenslanders doing amazing work and that goes to show the role we can play in making sure that our communities are a better place. Let us ensure that our neighbourhood centres are resourced to do the work that they do. Thanks to the secretariat and everyone involved. I look forward to making social isolation and loneliness a thing of the past in Queensland.