

# LCSA responses to Questions on Notice

Inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales

6 March 2025

## Question 3

**In your evidence you stated that social infrastructure was essential to reach lonely people on the neighbourhood level. Please expand on that statement.**

Helping people to alleviate their loneliness requires an enormous degree of trust, both in relationships with centre staff, as well as trust in the organisation. Both things take time.

Becoming a trusted and visible organisation takes time and consistency. An organisation that has no local footprint, has a 'fly-in, fly-out' reputation, or doesn't respond flexibly to the community will not engender trust in the communities they purport to serve. The fact that Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre (NNIC) received one hundred responses in under a week to their local survey on loneliness is a testament to their 50-year presence, relevance and connection to their community (NNIC submission to this Inquiry).

On a basic level, the reason the sub-local neighbourhood level is relevant is because there must be people that know specific community members exist, and when they are missing. This is frighteningly relevant during natural disasters. As Wardell Core Neighbourhood Centre noted in their evidence, post-floods there were socially isolated people on rooves and in trees for up to 24 hours, and no one knew they were there. It could have ended in loss of life. (Wardell Core came into existence in 2022 in response to the Northern Rivers floods).

For a lonely or socially isolated individual, it may be months after their first presentation to a neighbourhood centre before they feel safe or comfortable to disclose to a trusted individual worker the depth of struggles, including loneliness, that they are experiencing. They generally do not open with 'I'm lonely', and in fact may never utter those words. This is particularly true in the context of 'learned loneliness', where people have learned to live without social connectedness post-pandemic (Chaudhuri 2023). Community development workers and social workers use their expertise to observe if a community member seems socially disconnected, and to understand the unspoken ways in which a person becomes more socially connected: having a brighter disposition, turning up to the centre and social activities regularly, letting centre staff know when not to expect them (and to not be alarmed) if they will be away for a week, making friends that they inform you that they now see outside of the neighbourhood centre.

It is important to invest into community development activities from the ground up to address loneliness. This enables place-based organisations like neighbourhood centres to facilitate social connections between people, opportunities for individuals to find resources for their own hardship, to reconnect with their immediate community (neighbourhood or peers) or simply to 'find their tribe' and a sense of belonging.

One of the pitfalls in approaching complex issues such as loneliness with a 'service delivery' and programmatic model, hides in the administrative framework of public service commissioning or contracting activities in a community. The smallest possible government structure to be seen as local, is the local government. This can create the illusion of addressing issues locally, when in fact community happens and is felt on the neighbourhood level: in an apartment block, in a precinct or in one township within a Local Government Area.

LCSA sees its neighbourhood and community centre members as conduits between neighbourhood-level communities and local government-level initiatives and policies.

Neighbourhood centres meet communities where they are, which may be the local school, train station, shopping centre, playground or library.