

**Submission
No 11**

INQUIRY INTO PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF LONELINESS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Little Big Foundation

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Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry on Loneliness



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INTRODUCTION

Loneliness is an urgent and growing issue in Australia, one that affects not only our emotional well-being but also our physical health and social fabric. As a community-based organization, The Little BIG Foundation is dedicated to addressing this challenge head-on through grassroots interventions and the creation of community hubs, programs, and events. We believe that by fostering opportunities for genuine connection, Australians can lead happier, healthier, and kinder lives, connected to their neighbors and communities.

This submission draws on the experiences of the Little BIG Foundation, particularly through our flagship project, the Summer Hill Little BIG House, located in the heart of Sydney's Inner West. Since its establishment in 2021, the Summer Hill Little BIG House has become a vibrant residential hub, offering a place where individuals can build meaningful relationships, participate in community events, and overcome the social isolation that is so prevalent in today's society.

Our goal is not only to create physical spaces but to activate them through carefully curated programs that encourage ongoing engagement. From wellness workshops and neighborhood BBQs to community-wide initiatives, we have seen firsthand how small, local actions can create lasting impacts on individuals' sense of belonging and well-being.

In this submission, we aim to share our insights on the loneliness epidemic, highlighting the importance of grassroots action, the role of councils and planning departments, and the need for better community facilities. We strongly advocate for an approach that prioritizes social infrastructure and meaningful engagement, as simply building spaces without the right activation strategies will not produce the outcomes needed to combat loneliness.

We hope this inquiry recognizes the crucial role of local, community-led solutions, and the vital part that thoughtful planning and investment in public spaces play in fostering social cohesion.

ABOUT THE LITTLE BIG FOUNDATION

The Little BIG Foundation was set up to tackle loneliness in Australia by developing places, programs and events for social connection. We want all Australians to live happier, healthier and kinder lives through feeling connected to their community and neighbours.

Our flagship residential hub, the Summer Hill Little BIG House, is located at 16 Flour Mill Way, Summer Hill, Sydney. It services individuals in the Inner West who want to be better connected to their neighbours. The Little BIG Foundation is on a mission to inspire a true sense of belonging in communities by creating opportunities for neighbours to get to know each other better through places, programs and events that encourage social connection. As we address the growing epidemic of loneliness in Australia, we recognise the vital role that grassroots interventions and enhanced community and council facilities play in alleviating social isolation.

After 12 months of experimenting with socially-distanced community building ideas through 2020, we opened our first volunteer-led neighbourhood hub, The Summer Hill Little BIG House, in a master planned residential community in Summer Hill in 2021. And in 2022 we launched the Good Work tenant engagement program office communities in Sydney, Canberra, Brisbane and Perth.

We want all Australians to live happier, healthier and kinder lives through feeling connected to their community and neighbours, wherever they live, work and play. We work with the property industry to fund projects that bring people together. So far we have established communities in both residential apartment communities, wider suburbs and office towers.

You can read more about our programs in the Appendix.

THE LONELINESS CRISIS IN OUR COMMUNITIES

Loneliness is more than just a personal struggle—it is a public health issue that impacts physical and mental well-being, with consequences ranging from higher rates of depression and anxiety to increased healthcare costs. The issue cuts across age, socioeconomic, and geographic boundaries, but it is particularly concerning in urban areas where the pace of life and housing density can exacerbate feelings of isolation.

Australia has seen a decline in social contact over the past decades, with this trend severely worsened by the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Unsurprisingly, reduced social contact is closely associated with loneliness. Loneliness has profound impacts on the body and mind. People experiencing loneliness often report feeling headaches, stomach problems and physical pain.

According to the “State of the Nation” report, the people Australians are least socially connected to are their neighbours. This has a significant impact on loneliness, with the lead researcher, Dr Michelle Lim, noting that “where you feel like you can go to your neighbours for help, feeling that your neighbourhood is safe, and that you can rely on other people, those sorts of things are very much more associated with lower loneliness”. Several studies have found a link between a sense of neighbourhood belonging and reduced loneliness and knowing more people in one’s neighbourhood is also associated with reduced loneliness.

Australians have reported low levels of connection with their local communities and neighbours both before and during the pandemic. In 2018, almost half of Australians (47%) reported not having neighbours to call on for help. In 2021, over a third (38%) stated that they don’t know their neighbours by name¹². In 2023, less than half of Australians (48%) reported that if they were sick they could count on their neighbours to shop for groceries.

THE POWER OF GRASSROOTS INTERVENTIONS

At the Little BIG Foundation, we believe the most effective responses to loneliness begin at the grassroots level. Local communities are best positioned to identify the specific needs of their members and offer tailored, culturally relevant, and accessible solutions. Programs that focus on creating regular, face-to-face interactions centered around specific and niche interest areas. Our own self-care workshops, community BBQs, boardgames nights and other neighborhood events, have proven successful in building meaningful relationships and support networks.

Our work, along with many other community groups, is a testament to the power of small-scale initiatives that encourage connection in everyday spaces. These initiatives:

- **Foster a sense of belonging:** Whether it's through casual events, skill-sharing workshops, or regular market days, these activities give residents a reason to leave their homes and interact with neighbors.
- **Bridge social divides:** Grassroots programs bring together people from diverse backgrounds, helping to break down barriers that can contribute to loneliness.
- **Promote active engagement:** When individuals feel invested in their community, they are more likely to participate in local governance, volunteer activities, and collaborative projects.
- **Create a community of volunteers who look out for others:** When given the social permission as 'community leaders from the Little BIG House' we see individuals reaching out more to others, exhibiting more kindness and drawing more people into this mindset.

However, grassroots organizations like ours cannot address this issue in isolation. We need better support and coordination at the council and state levels.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY FACILITIES

One of the most significant barriers to addressing loneliness is the lack of suitable public spaces where people can gather freely and comfortably. In Summer Hill and surrounding areas, we have seen the transformative effect that well-designed community hubs can have in reducing social isolation. Facilities such as parks, libraries, and multipurpose centers serve as vital “third places”—spaces outside of home and work where people can gather, socialise, and build connections.

However, many of these facilities are underfunded, poorly maintained, or inaccessible. To effectively combat loneliness, we advocate for:

1. **Investment in community spaces:** Local councils should prioritise the development and upkeep of spaces that encourage social interaction. This includes upgrading existing infrastructure to make it more inviting and accessible to all demographics. We advocate for spaces with soul. Just because a space for community (i.e. free/low cost) does not mean it should not be beautiful and soulful place to be. The physical space offered by the Little BIG House is a major appeal for some program hosts. Hosts have noted that it feels comfortable – like a living room – and that this can make participants feel more at ease and able to connect.
 2. **Free (or very low cost):** We note that other community spaces, including those operated by councils, typically charge a usage fee. Even if these fees are low by commercial standards, they present a major barrier to local volunteers and hosts who must either cover costs themselves or else charge more for attendance (which may discourage attendance or be counter to the mission of the program). Little BIG House has a “free for free” policy, where hosts only make a donation to hire the venue if they’re offering a program that is free for attendees. The fee structure for paid events with community benefit is very affordable offering a sliding scale based on the cost for the end participant and therefore encouraging lower costs events. These community event rates are 75% lower than Inner West Council venues.
 3. **Care for volunteers:** We have noted that the team make it easy to run programs at the Little BIG House. There is less administrative burden to get started or to run events, and fewer disruptions than with other venues (e.g. public venues which are electoral sites or otherwise needed for public events). Support to collaboration with other volunteers and hosts within a community space is key to longevity of programs. Hosts at the Little BIG House value the regular training opportunities provided– some called out their value in terms of skills development, but hosts tended to see even more value in the opportunities they generated to meet other hosts, form connections and generate ideas about future events or potential collaborations.
- **Programs that promote ongoing engagement:** Loneliness isn’t solved by a one-time event. Councils should support long-term programs that encourage residents to form lasting connections, such as regular social activities, skills exchanges, and community support networks. One-off hiring of a community facility will not produce social outcomes.

THE ROLE OF THE PLANNING DEPARTMENT

In addition to local councils, the Department of Planning must play a more active role in addressing loneliness and fostering social cohesion, particularly during periods of growth and transition (like the current NSW housing crisis). While there is a clear need for more housing to accommodate growing populations, something we support wholeheartedly, the social fabric of communities must be considered alongside physical infrastructure.

- 1. Community infrastructure as a priority:** When planning new developments or redeveloping existing areas, the department must prioritise the inclusion of community infrastructure—such as parks, plazas, community centers, Little BIG Houses and libraries—that supports social interaction. It is not enough to simply build homes; we must also build spaces where people can connect, engage, and form relationships.
- 2. Supporting communities through transition:** As areas undergo development, especially large-scale residential projects, it's important to recognise the disruption this can cause. Communities need support during these transition periods, particularly in areas where long-standing neighborhoods are being transformed. Community champions of change are created before development begins by adding value to a community before adding more housing. Without adequate support, the risk of social fragmentation and loneliness increases. The department should ensure that there is a phased approach to the introduction of new facilities, services, and community-building initiatives to foster cohesion during these transitions.
- 3. Activation, not just construction:** Planning must also extend beyond the construction of physical spaces. It's about activating those spaces to ensure they are used in ways that foster community engagement. This includes creating well-thought-out programs, activities, and events that bring people together. And in particular, establishing volunteer programs which encourage ongoing grass-roots ownership. Collaboration with local councils, community groups, and grassroots organisations is essential to ensure that these spaces are vibrant and serve the social needs of residents. Simply building community spaces is insufficient—activating them with regular, engaging, and inclusive programming is crucial for their success in combating loneliness.

CONCLUSION

Loneliness is a complex issue that requires a multifaceted response, and we believe the foundation of any effective strategy must be local, accessible, and built around community relationships. The Little BIG Foundation is proud to be part of a growing movement that seeks to create real, lasting change through grassroots efforts and better use of public spaces. However, we need the support of local councils and the state government to create the facilities and programs that will help everyone feel connected and supported.

We urge the parliamentary inquiry to recognize the importance of grassroots interventions, the activation of community spaces, and the critical role that the Department of Planning must play in fostering social cohesion through thoughtful, people-centered urban planning.

Sincerely,

Sarah Mathews

CEO | The Little BIG Foundation

APPENDIX

Summer Hill Little BIG House - Social Impact Reports

Survey of social connectedness in and around the Summer Hill Little BIG House.

Prepared by Social Ventures Australia for the Little BIG Foundation.

- 2022 - <https://littlebigfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Little-BIG-Summer-Hill-Report-2022.pdf>
- 2023 - <https://littlebigfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Little-BIG-Report-2023.pdf>
- 2024 - https://littlebigfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Little-BIG-Report-2024_FINAL.pdf

Good Work Social Impact Report

Improving wellbeing and tenant experience in 6 office buildings across Australia.

Prepared by the Little BIG Foundation.

- 2023 - <https://littlebigfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Good-Work-Report-Short-Version-July-Report-090124.pdf>



LITTLE MOMENTS BIG SMILES

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