

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

**Organisation:** Engadine Community Services

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## Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation

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#### Introduction

Engadine Community Services (ECS) has been offering much needed programs and services to the local community since its establishment in 1971; this is a total of over 50 years in operation. ECS has continually offered programs and services to assist people to form connection with others and reduce isolation and loneliness. Our service has been a community lighthouse for people in the local area to gain information/referral, support for aged care with individual and group support, early intervention services for children and families, volunteer program, syringe disposal, JP services, tax help, computer classes for seniors, social outings and exercise classes. We support people from all backgrounds to connect with services, the community and other people through healthy and fun activities to reduce isolation and loneliness. ECS ensures it is aware of the changing and arising needs within the community, adapt, and introduce new services to meet these needs.

In May 2024, the services provided by ECS was mentioned in the Parliament of NSW Legislative Assembly with a Community Recognition Statement from Maryanne Stuart MP stating, *"the centre has been a cornerstone of our local community, tirelessly serving individuals from diverse backgrounds, connecting them, nurturing their growth and fostering a vibrant atmosphere of inclusion and togetherness. Engadine Community Services epitomises the essence of community care, responding to the needs of vulnerable individuals by providing essential services, facilitating connections to support systems and offering a wide array of inclusive programs."*

Loneliness' and 'social isolation' are related but distinct concepts. In its 2020 White Paper, "Ending Loneliness Together" states that *Loneliness is defined as an aversive and subjective feeling of social isolation that arises when an individual perceives that the quality or quantity of social relationships that they have is less than what they desire. Loneliness is not equivalent to social isolation, which is an objective measure of the number of friends, family, or other social connections that an individual has and the frequency of contact with these social connections. While social isolation and loneliness can both occur at the same time for an individual, they refer to different aspects of an individual's social relationships'* (Ending Loneliness Together 2020, p.11)

The major challenge for ECS is limited funding in trying to offer much-needed programs to the local community to assist in reducing isolation. Trying to implement more services to meet demand and emerging needs is extremely difficult with most funding grants only offering funding for the program costs and not for supporting staff hours to meet the costs of coordination. ECS rely heavily on volunteers to assist in many programs because without their assistance we could not assist the community in the way we do.

***Our Vision: All people feel included in our community, & all abilities, cultures & strengths are recognised.  
Our Purpose: To build resilient communities by providing leadership & responsive services to identified community.***

### Loneliness and Social Isolation in our Area

ECS was a partner in the Sutherland Shire Councils Befriending Project 2019, which drew on a range of academic and social research into the health benefits of social connectedness; including the starting research by Swinburne University showing one in four, Australians are lonely. The 50+ club, which is part of ECS, is a lasting social group of the project with over 50 members.

ECS is involved in the Sutherland Shire Seniors Healthy Mind Day Expo, which will focus on promoting mental health, and wellbeing to support the older population – this initiative has come from the Sutherland Shire Reference Group who are interested in the supports available for the older population in the Sutherland Shire to promote mental health, reduce isolation and improve wellbeing. ECS is a service within the Shire that focuses on long-term support and empowerment of older people who are at a high risk of social isolation. ECS being involved in this community expo will assist the community to access services to improve wellbeing and connection.

Older people are actively telling ECS that they have limited opportunities for social engagement in the Sutherland Shire, there are great number of Probus groups in the Shire for seniors of all abilities, however these groups are very large, and some have closed their books to new members due to demand. Many people have told ECS that they would like to participate in more activities, however many groups in the shire have a waiting list or it is too far for older people to travel to another location. ECS has an excellent reputation working with the local community and the two programs we would like to implement from a comprehensive survey we conducted will address the needs of older people by offering programs with a healthy focused ageing lens with many health benefits including physical and mental health. These programs will also provide social connection and the forming of positive relationships.

ECS is very well aware of many men and people from diverse backgrounds being socially isolated and the difficulty they have in reaching out for support. In the Sage Journal, it talks about quantitative investigations that consistently single out considerable gender variations in the experience of loneliness in Australia, and in particular, how men are especially prone to protracted and serious episodes of loneliness. In 2017, the Director of Lifeline implicated loneliness as a significant factor in suicide among Australian men. Most researchers agree that loneliness occurs when belongingness needs remain unmet; it is also acknowledged that such needs are culturally specific and changing.

### ECS approach to loneliness and isolation

ECS carried out a comprehensive survey in August 2024 that included over 240 responses from clients and local community members. This survey allowed us to gain feedback on what people want to participate in through their local Community and what they would like to see offered by ECS. The responses demonstrated the importance for people to connect with others and feel part of their community whilst enhancing their health both physically and mentally. ECS would like to take the suggestions from this survey and offer the programs that are in demand from local community residents.

From the comprehensive survey, that ECS carried out within the community this would see ECS introduce new programs to meet these needs and work with the community. ECS has focused on working with the community to ensure we are meeting the communities' needs and have the community participating and calling ECS "Their Neighbourhood Centre". These programs would include appropriate senior's exercise classes, walking group and a morning coffee and chat get together.

ECS is very well aware of the benefits of exercise classes to assist older people in strength building and balance; Doctors have referred many clients to our service to enhance this health area. We are working with a local gym who has offered an instructor to assist with our current senior's exercise classes and this has proved extremely successful with members of the group connecting with each other for coffee after the program. Two members of the group continue to come even though they have moved to another area because they say the friendships they have formed are such an important factor in their lives.

We are in discussion with the local Gym to offer appropriate gym classes with professional and qualified tutors to enhance wellbeing of older people and to encourage men to join. The morning coffee and chat group would enhance positive relationships, reduce isolation and create connectedness leading to positive wellbeing.

ECS sees positive outcomes from the groups they run and examples of this include our Social Craft, which is a group of 12 members coming together each week to chat, create activities and have afternoon tea, this craft group has stated they have formed strong relationships with each other and check in with each other if someone is away. ECS has clear evidence of wellness benefits of social support and early intervention services available through formal aged care, including social exercise and group outings as well as the ECS volunteer program and the ongoing 50+ club.

Another activity is our Bus Trips, which takes older people to places they would not be able to access without the support of our centre. The bus trips have up to 24 people attend and we receive wonderful feedback of the impact they have on wellbeing with participants stating that –

*"These social outings have changed my life"*

*"I have made friendships through these social outings, please keep them going"*

*"I have met so many nice people that I can share topics of conversation with"*

I believe we demonstrate very effectively, how our current programs have been extremely successful in enhancing people's wellbeing and social connectedness.

ECS also offers support to other local organisations to assist those who are isolated and doing it tough. An example of this is the support ECS gives to "One Meal" by offering their premises to serve a meal to all people on a Wednesday night who are doing it tough and are isolated. This has proved extremely successful with people joining with each other to share a meal, chat and connect.

### Engadine Community Service

Locally led ECS plays an enormous role in reducing isolation for individuals, families and the community. As listed previously in this document ECS runs numerous activities and programs for the local community which shows connection, increased wellbeing and a reduction in isolation by the number of people we have attending and joining in the programs. We gain feedback and evaluate programs continually for continuous improvement.

ECS has over 45 volunteers who offer over approximately 90 hours per week of assistance to ECS that equates to \$175,640.00 annually of value to the community. ECS volunteers assist with assisted shopping, bus outings, playgroup, friendly phone calls, computer classes, JP service and administration assistance. Volunteering plays a major role in reducing social isolation in two ways for the person who is receiving assistance from the volunteer and the volunteer themselves. Many of our volunteers have lost their partner or have no family present, they needed to connect with others, and their volunteering has assisted in this way.

- One volunteer recently said, *"I wanted to give back to the community after retirement I have met so many amazing people on my volunteer journey with stories of history and their lives"*.
- Another volunteer suggested, *"My wellbeing increased by doing volunteer work after ceasing paid employment, I felt isolated and this gave me a sense of worth and friendship."*
- Another long-time volunteer lost his partner and stated *"ECS is like a family to me with interaction with others and means so much"*.

By gaining NSW Government investment further into our NCC, we would be able to hire additional staff, which would enable ECS to further look at needs through community conversations, continuing surveys and data received from the census and other relevant research. We would then be able to run additional exercises programs, more information sessions for parents/carers, information sessions for healthy ageing, and run regular social activities for older people, CALD groups and families. We would also offer an intergenerational program between older people in the community with the local preschool. All these additional programs would assist our role as an organisation in assisting with reducing isolation and loneliness leading to enhanced wellbeing within individuals, families and the community.

## Neighbourhood Centres, Loneliness and Social Isolation

The most important step the NSW Government can take to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in the community is to provide a universal core-funding model to NCCs in NSW.

ECS have successfully completed fixed term contracts to meet the requirement of grant funding from Sutherland Shire Council, NSW Department of Communities and Justice and Department of Health and Aged Care.

As loneliness and social isolation increases in society post-pandemic, with the current cost of living crisis, acute housing crisis and rise of mental health struggles, NCCs are the ideal social infrastructure to be leveraged to reduce social isolation and loneliness in NSW communities. NCCs welcome all to their service, 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 and disenfranchised.

Despite the enormous impact NCCs have in reducing social isolation in NSW, they currently receive no core funding from the NSW Government – one of the last states in Australia where this is the case. They are reliant on program funding which is often short-term and inflexible.

The peak body for NSW NCCs, the Local Community Services Association (LCSA), outlines its core-funding model below, based on 2.5FTE minimum staff required for a safe working model. Our centre, as a LCSA member, endorses this model.

Core funding element	Cost per LCSA member organisation p.a.	Cost for 175 LCSA members p.a.
EO (SCHADS 8.1, 32h/wk)	\$120,901	\$21,157,719
Community Development Worker (SCHADS 5.1)	\$111,984	\$19,597,177
Admin worker (SCHADS 3.1, 15h/wk)	\$33,503	\$5,863,016
Operational contribution	\$50,000	\$8,750,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$316,388</b>	<b>\$55,367,912</b>

Core funding means that all NCCs can respond to social isolation and loneliness in their area taking into account demographics and research locally. The needs of the individual local community can be addressed instead of a one-size fits all approach by offering the same services and programs in all areas. Loneliness has become an epidemic and ABC News 2020 described this when they stated due to the pandemic loneliness, anxiety and boredom increased and has not fully recovered. 2,300 surveys were completed and negative impacts on mental health, reduced optimism and happiness was lower. During the pandemic government relied heavily on community centres to continue to offer services by web based and IT connection which they successfully did to support people through a very difficult time and maintain some form of connection - once again Neighbourhood Centres stepped up to support the local community as the cornerstone for people to reach out to. If another pandemic occurred, again the NCCs would be the connection for so many people in the community. Local communities need to be empowered, through local NCCs, to unite and solve social issues together from the ground up.

In 2022, the Queensland Government delivered core funding to all NCCs in Queensland, at \$230,000 per centre, per year. This was partially in response to recommendations from the Queensland 2021 Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness, in recognition of the central role NCCs play in reducing social isolation and loneliness. This funding model allows NCCs the flexibility and longevity required to keep the doors open and respond nimbly to community needs. We would ask the NSW government to do the same and show their support for the communities they wish to enhance social and health benefit outcomes for.

## Conclusion

The National Neighbourhood Centre Week's motto in 2024 was "Stronger Together". As has been demonstrated in this submission ECS and all other NCCs are the lighthouse and heart of any local community. NSW government needs to look at any strategy that is implemented addressing loneliness and social isolation moving forward should ensure that the local community organisations who create connection, healthy relationships and enhanced wellbeing throughout all of NSW are supported. Neighbourhood Centres support positive outcomes for the community in so many ways that leads to improved physical and mental health and wellbeing reducing isolation. Without the assistance of Neighbourhood Centres, the cost to the government with poorer health outcomes for many would be massive. Our centre supports LCSA's recommendations to this Inquiry that position NCCs as key social infrastructure to address social isolation and loneliness.