

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

Organisation: Parks Community Network

Date Received: 31 October 2024

Parks Community Network: Addressing Social Isolation in Fairfield

The Parks Community Network is a place-based organisation that has been serving the Fairfield community for 30 years, providing vital support, connection, and development to residents. As a community centre, we play a crucial role in reducing social isolation through volunteering, social activities, and self-help groups. We connect community members with partner organisations and offer support to vulnerable groups during crises and natural disasters. Our essential services, especially for low-income households, include food assistance, financial aid, and no-interest loans.

Understanding Loneliness and Social Isolation

'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 simultaneously, they refer to different aspects of an individual's social relationships' (Ending Loneliness Together 2020, p.11).

Community Context

Fairfield City, with a population of 208,475, is the fourth-largest Local Government Area in New South Wales and hosts the highest number of humanitarian settlers in the state. This diversity enriches our community but also brings unique challenges. Over 50% of residents were born overseas, primarily in Vietnam and Iraq, with nearly 70% speaking a language other than English at home. The SEIFA index ranks Fairfield as the most disadvantaged LGA in NSW, with 23% of the population living below the poverty line.

The Challenge of Social Isolation

Around 25% of Australians experience social isolation, a pressing global health issue recognized by the World Health Organisation. Social isolation and loneliness are linked to various negative outcomes, including increased risk of mental health issues and chronic diseases. Locally, we are particularly concerned about the excessive use of social media among children and young people, which hampers face-to-face interactions and social skills. Additionally, parents of children with additional needs

often feel isolated, especially after receiving diagnoses. Many express gratitude for our support, finding community and understanding at our centre.

If the NSW Government invests in our organisation and other community centres, we could employ a community development worker, facilitate community conversations, and run regular social activities for diverse groups. This funding would enhance our role as social connectors.

The Need for Core Funding

To effectively combat loneliness, the NSW Government should provide a universal core funding model for Neighbourhood and Community Centres. As loneliness and social isolation increase—exacerbated by the pandemic and current economic challenges—community centres are crucial social infrastructures. They welcome all individuals and foster connections, particularly for those who are isolated or vulnerable.

Currently, Neighbourhood and Community Centres in NSW do not receive core funding and instead rely on short-term, inflexible program funding. The Local Community Services Association (LCSA), the peak body for these centres, has proposed a core funding model based on a minimum staffing requirement of 2.5 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions to ensure a safe and effective working environment. Our centre, as a proud member of LCSA, fully endorses this funding model.

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

Strategies to Mitigate Social Isolation

- A multifaceted approach is essential to combat the adverse effects of social isolation. Key strategies include:
- Strengths-Based Community Development: Implement programs that leverage community strengths and promote co-design, ensuring services are relevant and effective. Educate families about the risks of excessive screen time and the benefits of in-person interactions.

- Government Policy Initiatives: Advocate for policies that address structural barriers to social inclusion, including housing and transport.
- Community-Led Initiatives: Foster collaboration within the community by engaging local organizations and organising events that encourage social interaction, particularly among children and young people.

Conclusion

Addressing social isolation in Fairfield requires a collaborative effort that leverages community strengths. By implementing these strategies, the Parks Community Network can enhance social connections and improve the quality of life for all residents. Prioritising these issues will help children and young people develop healthier social habits and strengthen community ties.

As National Neighbourhood Centre Week's motto in 2024 states, "Stronger Together." Neighbourhood and Community Centres are the heart of local communities. Future strategies to combat loneliness must prioritize these welcoming, place-based organisations, fostering vital connections and a sense of belonging for all in NSW. We support LCSA's recommendations positioning these centres as key social infrastructure in addressing social isolation and loneliness.