

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

Organisation: Groundswell Foundation

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

Submission to the NSW Legislative Council's
Standing Committee on Social Issues, chaired by the
Hon Dr. Sarah Kaine

1 November 2024

Foreword

On behalf of the Groundswell Foundation, we welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the NSW Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales ("Inquiry").

This Parliamentary Inquiry has the power to truly transform lives by helping people feel more connected every day. It could also inspire governments and communities across Australia to recognise loneliness for what it really is: a deeply painful emotion and a critical public health crisis. It's heartening to see the NSW Government take this step towards action—this could spark the cultural shift we desperately need to build more compassionate, connected communities.

The Groundswell Foundation brings together expertise from diverse perspectives on the topic of loneliness. Our Research Sub-Committee, which is delivering Australia-first research into the most effective interventions to support youth dealing with loneliness and social isolation, has prepared this submission to the Inquiry.

Our submission focuses on key topics raised in the Inquiry terms of reference.

- **Section 1** summarises the Groundswell Foundation's comprehensive research into the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in Australia (*terms of reference items a, b, c, d and f*)
- **Section 2** introduces our latest work on the categorisation and evaluation of existing initiatives to tackle loneliness, and a framework for the design of new and experimental interventions (*items g and h*)
- **Section 3** outlines detailed recommendations for NSW Government and other organisations to lead and support (*items i and j*), building on the broad convening power of Groundswell Foundation to bring together diverse industry perspectives

The profound impact of loneliness on the wellbeing, mental and physical health, and productivity of NSW residents will be well-documented through this Inquiry. In the interest of the Standing Committee obtaining broad input across all of the Inquiry terms of reference, other experts and community leaders focused on loneliness are suggested in **Appendix A**.

If we fail to build more connected lives and a more connected society, we will pay an ever-increasing price in the form of our individual and collective health and wellbeing. And we will continue to splinter and divide until we can no longer stand as a community or a country. Instead of coming together to take on the great challenges before us, we will further retreat to our corners—angry, sick, and alone.

We need to build a movement to mend the social fabric of NSW and Australia. It will take all of us—individuals and families, schools and workplaces, health care and public health systems, technology companies, state governments, faith organisations, and communities—working together to destigmatise loneliness and change our cultural and policy response to it. It will require reimagining the structures, policies, and programs that shape a community to best support the development of healthy relationships.

This Parliamentary Inquiry must ignite a fundamental shift in how the NSW Government operates, ensuring that loneliness is no longer sidelined but becomes a core consideration in every policy decision. This is a genuine opportunity for the NSW Government to promote a non-partisan, long-term, and multi-sector policy framework to give much-needed impetus to a series of aligned programs and projects that seek to address one of the most challenging social issues of our time.

The Groundswell Foundation stands ready to support, guide and promote NSW Government action to tackle loneliness.

Our future depends on what we do today.

Sincerely,



Martin Blake
Chairman
Groundswell Foundation Limited



Johanna Pitman
Chair, Research Sub-Committee
Groundswell Foundation

Executive Summary

Loneliness presents profound threats to our health and wellbeing. But we have the power to respond. By taking small steps every day to strengthen our relationships, and by supporting community efforts to rebuild social connection, we can rise to meet this moment together. We can build lives and communities that are healthier and happier. And we can ensure our country and the world are better poised than ever to take on the challenges that lay ahead.

Given the immediate social imperative and compelling data on acceleration of loneliness, the Groundswell Foundation urges the NSW Government to commit to a multi-sector, accountable framework for addressing loneliness and to lead initiatives that prioritise community connection and well-being.

We offer five specific policy recommendations, built on the **establishment of an enduring oversight body** to foster cross-sector collaboration and drive meaningful, long-term change to reduce loneliness in NSW.

1. **Embed accountability** via clear, measurable objectives; with departmental support to coordinate support and evaluate interventions
2. **Leverage ongoing NSW government investment** in place-based initiatives on housing, community assets, public spaces and nature to design out loneliness
3. **Support business-led initiatives** currently explored with supermarkets, pharmacists, other employers, and other spaces at the front-line of the loneliness epidemic
4. **Optimise new and existing inventions** to ultimately create a collaborative ecosystem that is simultaneously experimental, and evidence-based.
5. **Destigmatise loneliness through an awareness campaign** to encourage meaningful conversations and support community connections.

Recognising the pervasive nature of loneliness across demographic groups, we believe an inter-related tapestry of solutions is required to tackle loneliness. In line with our approach of “Thinking Big, Starting Small and Scaling Fast”, our research suggests a **framework for coordinating delivery of interventions** to underpin efforts to build an evidence base on loneliness through dedicated data collection, research and evaluation.

To address loneliness in NSW, the Groundswell Foundation urges the NSW Government to commit to a multi-sector, accountable approach, with initiatives that prioritise community connection and wellbeing.

SECTION 1: Loneliness in NSW

The prevalence of loneliness has been extensively researched, with this NSW Parliamentary Inquiry promising to sharpen the ongoing data capture and identification of populations most at risk in NSW. Similarly, there is overwhelming evidence of the negative impact of loneliness on mental health, physical health and economic wellbeing. Understanding the factors that contribute to the development of transient loneliness into chronic loneliness and quantifying the financial costs of loneliness to the NSW budget and the state economy will be important outcomes of this Inquiry.

The Groundswell Foundation's understanding of loneliness in NSW is based on our research of loneliness in Australia, outlined in *Connections Matter - A report on the impacts of loneliness in Australia*.¹ The key findings are summarised and updated for the NSW context.

Defining loneliness

Loneliness is a subjective, negative feeling associated with a perceived gap between a person's current social relationships and their desired social relationships.² This is usually related to a belief that the quality of social relationships is poor.³ As such, an individual may be lonely even though they interact frequently with others. Loneliness can be a short-term, transient experience with feelings coming and going, or may persist in the long-term to become a chronic experience.⁴

Prevalence of loneliness

More Australians report feeling lonely than ever before — and the issue is getting worse. Rates remained relatively stable at around 17% from 2010–2016.⁵ However, by 2018 this increased to around one in four Australians reporting problematic levels of loneliness⁶, and a 2021 survey found 40% of Australians perceived themselves to be lonely.⁷

While all Australians will experience loneliness throughout their lifetime, certain population groups face a greater risk of loneliness. Loneliness is notably high among those 18-24 years old, with 41% of young adults experiencing persistent loneliness in 2023,⁸ with the increase

¹ Groundswell Foundation (2022), [Connections Matter - A report on the impacts of loneliness in Australia](#)

² D. Russell, L. Peplau and C. Cutrona (1980), [The revised UCLA Loneliness Scale: Concurrent and discriminant validity evidence](#), Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, vol. 39, no. 3, p. 472–480.

³ L. Peplau and D. Perlman (1982), [Loneliness: A sourcebook of current theory, research, and therapy](#)

⁴ Campaign to End Loneliness (2015), [Measuring your impact on loneliness in later life](#)

⁵ Relationships Australia (2018), [Is Australia experiencing an epidemic of loneliness? Findings from 16 waves of the Household Income and Labour Dynamics of Australia Survey](#)

⁶ M. Lim (2018). [Australian Loneliness Report: A survey exploring the loneliness levels of Australians and the impact on their health and wellbeing](#), Australian Psychological Society

⁷ Astell-Burt, T. et al (2023). [Need and interest in nature prescriptions to protect cardiovascular and mental health: a nationally-representative study with insights for future randomised trials](#). Heart, lung and circulation, 32(1), 114-123.

⁸ Ending Loneliness Together. (2024). [Why we feel lonely: Exploring the causes of loneliness in Australia](#).

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023), [Social isolation and loneliness](#)

in social isolation partly due to digital forms of communication replacing face-to-face interaction.⁹ Older Australians, particularly those living alone or in care facilities, are also vulnerable to loneliness, especially following retirement, loss of loved ones, or reduced mobility.¹⁰ Other groups disproportionately experiencing loneliness include parents (especially single parents), First Nations peoples, people who identify as LGBTQIA+ and migrants.¹¹

Impacts of loneliness

While loneliness is a public health issue that many Australians identify with, it's at risk of being trivialised because its impacts remain widely unrecognised. Yet robust evidence indicates that loneliness is detrimental to physical health and mental health, and increases the risk of early mortality by 26%.¹²

The financial costs of loneliness to the NSW budget and the state economy consist of both direct costs on healthcare and indirect costs related to reduced productivity and workforce engagement. Quantification of the economic costs for NSW could consider the following factors and growing body of research in other jurisdictions:

- **Healthcare Costs** - Loneliness is linked to various physical and mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, heart disease, high blood pressure, chronic pain, and cognitive decline. As such, people who are lonely are also more likely to rely on the use of health services, including general practice contacts, emergency treatments, and hospital admissions.¹³
- **Lost Productivity and Absenteeism** - Poor mental health, often exacerbated by social isolation, costs Australian businesses up to \$10.9 billion annually in lost productivity.¹⁴ People suffering from loneliness and related mental health issues are more likely to take sick leave, leading to absenteeism in workplaces. The indirect costs of absenteeism can be substantial for employers, who must either temporarily replace workers or deal with decreased overall output. UK research demonstrated that loneliness costs businesses £2.5bn a year, as a result of lost productivity, and additional costs of recruitment and sickness absence.¹⁵

M. Lim, R. Eres and C. Peck (2019), [The young Australian loneliness survey understanding loneliness in adolescence and young adulthood](#), Victorian Health Promotion Foundation

M. Lim and Telstra (2021), [Talking Loneliness Report](#)

⁹ E. O'Day and R. Heimberg (2021), [Social media use, social anxiety, and loneliness: A systematic review](#), Computers in Human Behavior Reports, vol. 3, p. 100070

¹⁰ O. Fakoya, N. McCorry and M. Donnelly (2020), [Loneliness and social isolation interventions for older adults: a scoping review of reviews](#), BMC Public Health, vol. 20, no. 129.

¹¹ Groundswell Foundation (2022), [Connections Matter - A report on the impacts of loneliness in Australia](#), p.12

¹² Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., Baker, M., Harris, T., & Stephenson, D. (2015). [Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review](#). Perspectives on psychological science - a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, 10(2), 227–237.

¹³ Campaign to End Loneliness, [The health impact of loneliness](#)

¹⁴ Australian Psychological Society (2018). [Australian Loneliness Report: A survey exploring the loneliness levels of Australians and the impact on their health and wellbeing](#).

¹⁵ New Economics Foundation (2017). [The Cost of Loneliness to UK Employers](#).

- **Early Retirement and Reduced Workforce Participation** - Social isolation often exacerbates mental health problems, making it difficult for people to stay active in the workforce. This can have long-term effects on the economy, particularly as Australia faces an aging population where maintaining workforce participation is crucial.
- **Social Services and Community Support Costs** - Social outreach programs, community engagement initiatives, and support for elderly and vulnerable populations are necessary to reduce loneliness and its effects, and require significant public funding.
- **Impact on Innovation and Creativity** - Social connection plays a key role in fostering creativity and innovation. By stifling collaboration and engagement, loneliness can reduce innovation in industries that rely on teamwork and collective problem-solving. This indirect effect can hamper economic growth in sectors dependent on creative solutions and cooperation.

There are further profound socio-political impacts to consider, such as the link between loneliness and extremist views and antisocial behaviour.¹⁶

¹⁶ Forbes (21 July 2024), [Robert Putnam Practically Discovered Social Isolation: Here's Why He Says It's Time To 'Join Or Die'](#)
National Institute of Justice (December 2023), [Five Things About the Role of Social Networks in Domestic Radicalization](#)

SECTION 2: Interventions to tackle loneliness

Action is needed now more than ever, as we recognise the critical importance of building connections and community for a more prosperous NSW that works for everyone. An array of government and non-government initiatives already exist, but the broad field of practical and professional intervention is characterised by a lack of consensus about its nature, its aims, and its desired outcomes.

Such a situation is not uncommon in the public policy arena, particularly in those areas that seek to address such “problematic realities” (Moore, 1995): the public look to government to provide solutions while, at the same time, government is unable, of itself, to provide those solutions. Once the issue is established at the public and political levels, governments tend to respond by providing some measure of funding to support professional intervention – either directly, through government departments and services, or indirectly through third parties, notably the NGO sector.

In response to such push factors a gap frequently arises between the rhetoric of service providers and the reality of their practice. Practice tends to remain unchanged: but the rhetoric by which it is described corresponds to the requirements of funding selection criteria. As a result, solutions are “playing in the margins” and fail to result in meaningful, scalable and structural change. Meanwhile, conditions fostering loneliness are made worse by building houses with limited local social infrastructure, referred to as ‘Lonelygenic Environments’.¹⁷

Before recommending new initiatives that may have “worked” in other jurisdictions, the NSW Government has an opportunity to support an ecosystem of inter-related interventions, utilise best practice evaluation of interventions, and ensure new interventions are designed and delivered strategically.

Categorising interventions

Any efforts by the NSW Government to support a collaborative ecosystem of initiatives to tackle loneliness should acknowledge the broad array of interventions that exist. These interventions can target specific demographic groups, and are conducted in a variety of settings, including the workplace, healthcare centres, community organisations and public spaces.

The Groundswell Foundation’s research project to assess the effectiveness of interventions to tackle loneliness in youth (aged 16-25) provides an important contribution to the evidenced based research by categorising the variety of programs and activities currently being delivered to address loneliness (see **Appendix B**).

¹⁷ Feng, X., & Astell-Burt, T. (2022), [Lonelygenic environments: a call for research on multilevel determinants of loneliness](#), The Lancet Planetary Health, 6(12), e933-e934

Evaluating interventions

While an evidence-based approach to supporting interventions in NSW is recommended, there are several well-known and interconnected challenges to the evaluation of interventions that tackle loneliness.

- There is a limited number of studies that quantify the impact of interventions as a reference point or to provide baseline data
- The quality of evidence about the effectiveness of interventions can be poor, stemming from:
 - shortage of randomised controlled trials
 - lack of long-term follow-up due to limited funding cycles
 - variability in the definitions of social isolation and loneliness, and
 - variability in the measurement tools and outcome measures used
 - small sample sizes, due to difficulty in recruiting those who are extremely isolated or lonely.
- The benefits of interventions to prevent loneliness (such as making the built environment more conducive to social connections; improving green space and access to nature) are difficult to quantify using traditional cost-benefit analysis, and require more sophisticated measures of counterfactual impact, and Social Return on Investment (SROI) methods.¹⁸

Coordinating new and existing interventions

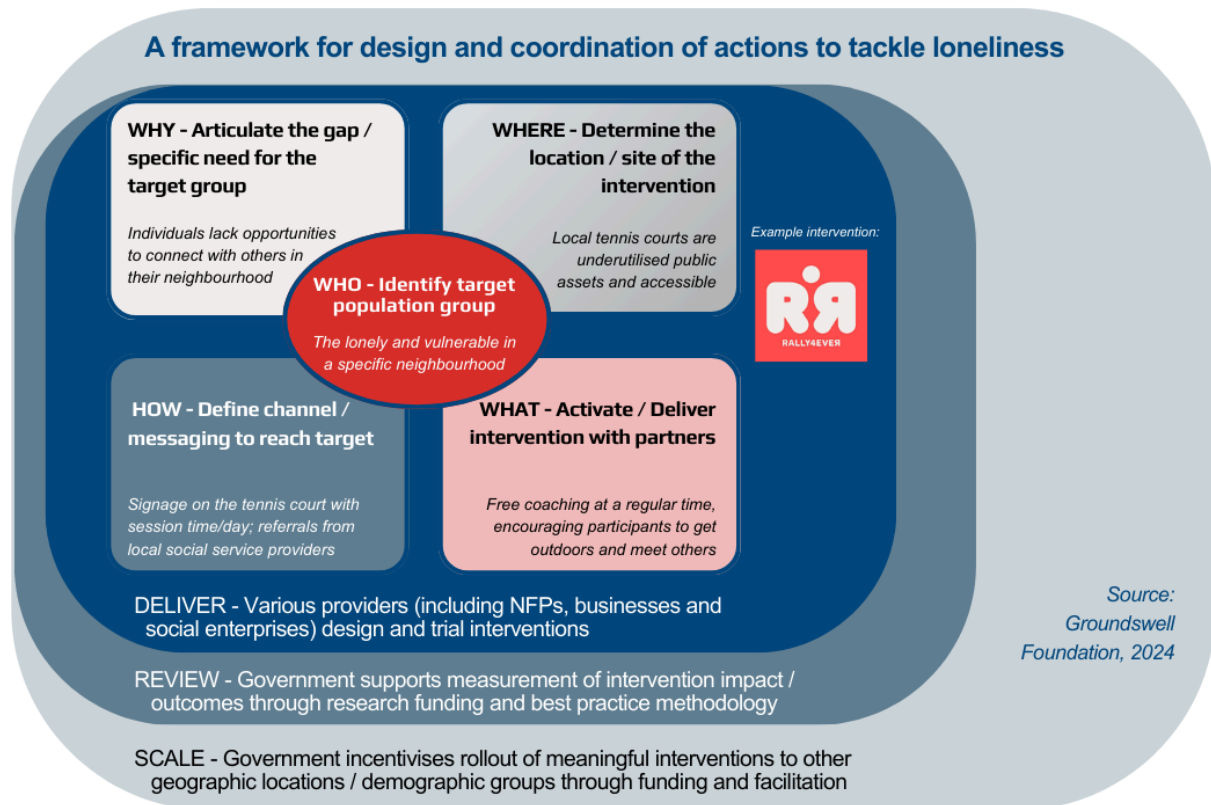
The Groundswell Foundation believes in “Thinking Big, Starting Small and Scaling Fast” when identifying ways to tackle loneliness. As such, pilot programs, demonstration projects, and successful existing initiatives should provide the inspiration for NSW Government efforts to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness in the community. Concurrently, efforts to build the evidence base for loneliness through dedicated data collection, research and evaluation must continue.

To achieve this, a rethink of policy design processes and decision-making on funding choices is required. This is an area where NSW has previously shown leadership,¹⁹ and further innovation is required. Recognising the wide array of possible interventions and the inherent challenges in evaluating the relative effectiveness of those interventions (outlined above), the following framework for program design could be adopted to ensure a tapestry of solutions can be pursued simultaneously.²⁰

¹⁸ Raj Patel (29 October 2020), [Common policy problems and what researchers can do about them](#)

¹⁹ Pia Andrews (4 October 2019), [Transforming public policy for the 21st century: how the NSW Government Policy Lab learned to use modern design methods to create more user-friendly solutions](#), The Mandarin

²⁰ The framework includes an example (*in italics*) of an inspiring intervention to address loneliness by [Rally4Ever](#), which was formed to improve the mental and physical wellbeing of our community through tennis and social connection.



Using this framework, NSW Government could provide the overarching leadership and community messaging to tackle loneliness, while the vibrant NFP sector and other providers deliver innovative activities to maximise existing NSW Government investments and social services. In turn, this will nurture an appetite for experimentation, and build a collaborative ecosystem with a growing evidence base on impact and outcomes.

SECTION 3: Recommendations for Action

The Parliamentary Inquiry represents not only an important recognition of the issue of loneliness, but also a genuine opportunity for the NSW Government to rise above any adversarial political approach, and promote a non-partisan, long-term, and multi-sector policy framework to address loneliness.

The NSW Government is in a prime position to:

- Capitalise on the experience of other jurisdictions, and introduce meaningful actions with speed and agility
- Leverage the diverse and large population of NSW to become a leader in interventions to tackle loneliness
- Collaborate with a engaged ecosystem of community organisations and businesses motivated to tackle loneliness
- Mobilise once-in-a-generation infrastructure spending and investment in housing solutions to ensure the built environment “designs out” loneliness

Outlined below are a series of aligned initiatives that should be welcomed as innovative, practical, and meaningful. And for the cohort of young people disproportionately affected by loneliness, these actions may offer not only practical assistance, but a demonstration of how political leaders can make a practical difference to their lives.

1. EMBED ACCOUNTABILITY

We call on the NSW Government to commit to structural change by:

- 1) An enduring oversight body to monitor the implementation of loneliness initiatives and advise government on trends, intervention points and observations from experts at regular intervals.
- 2) Clear, measurable objectives that span departments with an overarching goal or target to reduce loneliness that government, private sector and the community can get behind
- 3) A systems-led approach to driving reform and accountability with dedicated departmental responsibility for coordination of support and evaluation of interventions

Given the immediate social imperative and compelling data on future acceleration of loneliness, we see the establishment of an enduring oversight body to tackle loneliness as foundational to all our recommendations.

While the UK Connected Society strategy was a ground-breaking report, the true strength of the UK policy came from the rigour of the annual reports that measured progress on each of

the three strategy objectives.²¹ The delivery of the annual reports was overseen by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Loneliness and Connected Communities. We recommend the NSW Government adopt a similar governance structure and process to ensure ongoing progress in tackling loneliness in NSW.

2. LEVERAGE PLACE-BASED INVESTMENTS

We call on NSW Government to leverage ongoing investment in housing, community assets, public spaces and nature to design out loneliness, specifically:

- 1) Continue to invest in libraries as accessible, wi-fi-enabled locations for community activities
- 2) Review planning policies to ensure they will deliver connection and access to green space for all ages, especially youth and young adults, referencing the significant body of research from the NSW Productivity Commission, NSW Government Architect, Western Sydney Local Health District and the Loneliness Lab (see [Appendix 3](#))
- 3) Ensure new developments, including transport-oriented developments, build in access to nature requirements that reflect the latest research
- 4) Encourage novel uses of natural assets and public spaces by local councils, community housing providers, universities, and not-for-profit organisations. Practical initiatives could include:
 - a) Place-based demonstration projects which test concepts to improve social connections through use of quality public spaces across NSW
 - b) Capacity-building amongst entities involved in development by creating best practice resources and communities of practice
 - c) A competitive grant program for entities creating community connection in public spaces
- 5) Fund research to deliver and robustly evaluate social prescribing and nature prescribing programs (i.e. using randomised controlled trial methodology) to optimise the benefit of these measures for local communities.

NSW has an enviable track record of investment in community assets and public infrastructure to support population growth in NSW. While access to green space has been

²¹ 1) [Reducing stigma](#) by building the national conversation on loneliness, so that people feel able to talk about loneliness and reach out for help.

2) [Driving a lasting shift](#) so that relationships and loneliness are considered in policy-making and delivery by organisations across society, supporting and amplifying the impact of organisations that are connecting people.

3) [Playing our part in improving the evidence base on loneliness](#), making a compelling case for action, and ensuring everyone has the information they need to make informed decisions through challenging times.

an underlying tenet of planning processes, the quality of green space can vary greatly and may unintentionally fail to address the needs of those most prone to loneliness. For example, a park with play equipment designed for young children may not be a convivial environment for teens and young adults.

Leveraging place-based investments has another benefit for NSW Government. It recognises the growing importance of the built environment and social determinants in causing loneliness, and positions NSW as a global leader in this field. It also ensures the role of the NSW Government is to get the preconditions right to design out loneliness, rather than focusing on ‘fixing’ the individual experiencing loneliness.

3. SUPPORT BUSINESS-LED INITIATIVES

We call on NSW Government to rally behind business-led initiatives currently being supported by the Groundswell Foundation and other organisations, specifically:

- 1) Encouraging supermarkets to introduce a slow queue to encourage conversation and interaction²²
- 2) Providing talking points and training to pharmacists as trusted community leaders who engage daily with individuals experiencing loneliness²³
- 3) Promoting the MindForward Alliance Leadership Pledge²⁴ or equivalent for Australian employers in partnership with Corporate Mental Health Alliance Australia
- 4) Creating spaces within shopping centres to foster social connections and/or deliver loneliness-related interventions²⁵

Efforts to tackle loneliness must be incorporated into retail locations and workplaces. Beyond corporate wellbeing initiatives, the Groundswell Foundation is working with business leaders to explore new initiatives targeting NSW residents where they need it. The support of the NSW Government will be valuable in promoting these initiatives, and supporting pilot programs to take place in NSW.

²² ABC News (5 September 2023), [Feeling lonely? Too many of us do. Here's what our supermarkets can do to help](#)

²³ Pharmaceutical Society of Australia (5 August 2024), [Pharmacists to help address loneliness epidemic with world-first training and education](#)

²⁴ The Global Business Collaboration for Better Workplace Mental Health, [The MindForward Alliance Leadership Pledge](#)

²⁵ BDC Network (8 March 2024), [How shopping centers can foster strong community connections](#)

4. OPTIMISE NEW AND EXISTING INTERVENTIONS

We call on NSW Government to support collaboration between providers and evaluation of best practices to enhance the effectiveness of interventions in this multi-dimensional space, specifically:

- 1) Incorporate findings from the Groundswell Foundation's forthcoming research into the effectiveness of interventions to address loneliness in young people (16-25) into future funding decisions
- 2) Encourage collaboration within the ecosystem, such as being promoted by Lifeline Australia to ensure helpseekers can be quickly directed to the right services to address loneliness
- 3) Support development of a digital directory of interventions to tackle loneliness, such as being pursued by Ending Loneliness Together with InfoXchange
- 4) Explore the practice of nature prescribing, through funding for a randomised trial of the intervention and evaluation of benefits for individuals, to build upon the promising findings of a new Australian national cohort study reporting relief from loneliness resulting from 1-2 hours per week spent in nature²⁶
- 5) Encourage loneliness to be incorporated as a dedicated area of inquiry into Australian institutions such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics or the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare.

Developments in reducing loneliness rely upon a dedicated evidence base to understand the prevalence, impacts and effectiveness of solutions. Research needs to be conducted in Australia to design context-specific solutions in order to maximise uptake and impact. Using the framework for design and coordination of actions to tackle loneliness (outlined in [Section 2](#)), NSW Government has an opportunity to build this knowledge base, setting the baseline measurements of loneliness to evaluate trends, sharing best practice to encourage ongoing evaluation of interventions, and scale strategically targeted interventions.

5. REDUCE STIGMA AROUND LONELINESS

We call on NSW Government to back campaigns to destigmatise loneliness and encourage meaningful conversations to support community connections, specifically:

- 1) Identify target groups most in need of awareness-raising about loneliness

²⁶ Astell-Burt, T., Navakatikyan, M. A., & Feng, X. (2024), [Contact with nature may be a remedy for loneliness: A nationally representative longitudinal cohort study](#). Environmental Research, 263, 120016.

- 2) Develop a public awareness campaign, in partnership with creative agencies and media channels
- 3) Normalise conversations about loneliness and mental health through the use of celebrities/community leaders as loneliness ambassadors
- 4) Encourage the sharing of stories of loneliness through a short film competition, writing competition, or social media

NSW Government has an opportunity to quickly share key findings of this Inquiry in the form of an emotive campaign to reduce the stigma around loneliness. Using best practice methods, a reflective public awareness campaign would be authentic (featuring real people, real stories, and real events); be guided by data (drawing attention to what's happening right now, building on actual insights) and include a clear message and call to action. Examples of public awareness campaigns from other jurisdictions and brands are included in [Appendix C](#).

About Groundswell Foundation

The Groundswell Foundation was established to address the growing issue of loneliness and its impact on mental health in Australia. We believe in “Thinking Big, Starting Small and Scaling Fast” to shape a better future by tackling loneliness in Australia and the rest of the world.

Our mission is to work together to address loneliness in Australia. We do this by investing for impact. We aim to be at the cutting edge, identifying and supporting best-in-class innovative programs that drive better solutions to counteract the identified issues of loneliness and mental ill-health. We are happy to embrace risk – to be bold, to invest in evidence-based, super-early mental ill-health and loneliness detection pilot programs, to measure their impact and adapt and iterate so that outcomes are meaningful and scalable both within Australia and across the globe.

Our vision is a mentally healthier Australia. We aim to achieve this through research into the causes, treatment and prevention of loneliness, education and collaboration with other organisations in Australia. We create collaborative partnerships between business, government, community and organisations focused on loneliness.

Established in February 2022 as a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee, the Groundswell Foundation’s work is guided by the Reference Group of 25 people - who each bring their expertise and perspective to ensure that progress is made in tackling loneliness.

We believe that:

- healthy young people are critical to our nation and our future
- every Australian has the right to be respected as an individual and we acknowledge their specific needs, rights and contributions
- access to the right support at the right time can positively reset a young person’s life trajectory
- access alone is not enough – the quality of services and outcomes matter
- an integrated and collaborative approach is the best way to support the wellbeing of all Australians.

The Groundswell Foundation is focused on three pillars of activity:

1 Knowledge: Building the data and evidence- based case for loneliness so it is properly considered in the context of health and wellbeing in Australia.

2 Awareness: Identifying the best channels through which to broadcast messages about how to deal with loneliness and its impacts — and executing those messages so as to raise awareness.

3 Impact: Activities and/or sponsorship that will have the greatest impact on addressing loneliness in Australia.

APPENDIX A: Experts / Practitioners

[Prof. Thomas Astell-Burt](#) - ARC Future Fellow focused on nature-based solutions for loneliness

[Prof. Brock Bastian](#) - Brings clinical and social expertise as President of the Society for the Australasian Social Psychologists

[Martin Blake](#) - Chair of the Groundswell Foundation, and key advocate for actions to address loneliness

[Anna Brooks](#) - Leads research at Lifeline Australia on emerging areas of crisis and populations at risk, to refine programs and interventions.

[Dame Tracey Crouch](#) - Appointed [the World's First Loneliness Minister](#) by the UK government in 2018, and an advocate for the powerful link between sport and mental well-being.

[Prof. Xiaoqi Feng](#) - Detailed research and thought leadership on [lonelygenic environments](#)

[Tim Hewson](#) - Mental health advocate and founder of a grassroots initiative for men's mental health which is growing organically across NSW, Victoria and QLD.

[Stephen Hunt](#) - Channels the power of the marketing, media and creative industries to help charities give at risk young people a better future

[Eddie Jackson](#) - Brings the local council perspective and experience with democratic demise through community isolation

[Michelle Lim](#) - Scientific expert and practising clinical psychologist generating evidence-based research on loneliness, with a focus on effective digital interventions

[Trevor Matthews](#) - Explains the impacts of actuarial options and consequences for the insurance industry

[Alex O'Mara](#) - Shows how public spaces can be designed to increase social cohesion

[Waminda Parker](#) - Builds networks across government, land managers, industry groups, community and research to increase community resilience through nature

[Vanessa Pilla](#) - Started an industry leading pilot, called the [Loneliness Lab](#), on how the built environment could help solve loneliness

[Johanna Pitman](#) - Investigates how shared public spaces and local clubs/associations enhance community connections

[Louise Fleming](#) - Delivers a grassroots tennis program to homeless and socially isolated individuals

[Ian Pollari](#) - Leading professional service director at the front line of managing staff suffering from stress, burnout and isolation

[Mike Pratt AM](#) - Investigates the relative fiscal benefits of public policy interventions

[Geoff Ross](#) - Drives connectivity and wellbeing through technology as a successful founder

[Colin Seery](#) - Leads strategic delivery of Lifeline Australia services to ensure a collaborative ecosystem of crisis-related support for help-seekers

[David Spriggs](#) - Develops technology solutions to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the not-for-profit sector.

[Mitch Wallis](#) - Founder of Heart on My Sleeve, author of Real Connections, and leader in the wellbeing space.

APPENDIX B: Types of Interventions

[NOTE: This emerging research by the Groundswell Foundation will be refined and published in 2025]

Direct Support Programs connect individuals on a personal level, by meeting new people, building friendships, or receiving support from peers and mentors. These programs create one-on-one or small group connections that can make an individual feel more understood and less alone, such as:

Friendship Circles - coordinated groups that meet regularly with the aid of a coordinator, to share experiences and build friendships. It's a small, face-to-face group of six to eight people who meet once a week for three months.

Mentoring Program - structured setup where you get to connect with someone who can offer guidance, advice, and support based on their experience.

Buddy Program - foster connections and do fun activities together. Buddies are paired and generally share something in common. Buddies are expected to then regularly check in and support each other, with a particular focus on a shared activity.

Community Connectors - designed to make it easier for people to find and join activities in their communities, by getting to know each person's unique situation, interests, and needs ensuring the support offered is relevant and meaningful.

Activity-Based Programs focus on engaging in activities that bring people together and foster a sense of belonging, in a group or community settings.

Community Sports Leagues - Stay active and be part of a team, encouraging social ties and opportunities to connect with others.

Volunteer Groups - Meeting new people with similar interests, make friends and be part of a community, while contributing to something meaningful and learning new skills.

Youth Club - Targeted to 16–25-year-olds, offering sports, arts, workshops, and social events, catering to different interests and encouraging social interaction.

Cultural and Art Programs - Connect with others while expressing creativity, via a painting class, a theatre group, or a music workshop

Hobby-Based Clubs - Social groups formed around shared interests, such as reading, hiking, or gaming.

Intergenerational programs - Bringing together people from different age groups to hang out and learn from each other, doing activities like storytelling, gardening, or tech workshops.

Gamified Social Challenges - Use game-like features to make socializing interactive, from fitness contests to cooking competitions or online trivia quizzes, where you earn points for completing tasks or reaching milestones.

Skills Building Programs focus on personal growth and self-awareness, to build resilience and boost confidence to engage more in social activities and form meaningful connections with others.

Mindfulness Training - Strategies to be more present and aware in your interactions with others, through guided meditations, mindful breathing or body scans

Social skills training workshop - Learn and practise essential communication skills like starting conversations, listening, reading body language, and handling conflicts.

Counselling - Talk about anything (stress, relationship issues, anxiety, or just feeling overwhelmed) and learn how to communicate more effectively, manage your emotions, and boost your confidence in social situations.

Art therapy - Use creative activities, like drawing, painting, or sculpting, to help people express their feelings and thoughts.

Digital Programs help people connect and feel less lonely by bringing people together who have similar interests or experiences, regardless of geographic location.

Virtual Support Groups - Online platforms to help people connect and support each other from anywhere, sometimes led by trained facilitators and focusing on specific topics

Digital Mental Health Apps - Manage loneliness and improve mental health with personalized resources like articles, videos, and exercises, including guided meditations and activities.

Online Counselling Services - Connect with counsellors from home using video calls, phone calls, or messaging.

Virtual Reality Social Spaces - Digital environments where you can hang out and interact with others using VR headsets, join virtual meetups, play games, attend workshops, and chat with people in real-time.

Indirect interventions are also important enablers of social connection although do not specifically aim to mitigate isolation or loneliness. Nonetheless, they may have significant effects for an individual's perceived or objective isolation.

"Third Spaces" - such as public spaces, green space and nature, are increasingly seen as the focal point for social engagement, and can be optimised for safety and accessibility to help people connect

Hearing aids - can assist an individual with impaired hearing to socialise and engage with others

Participation in an exercise program - for health may provide new opportunities to meet new people

APPENDIX C: References

Interventions

[Building Connection: Exploring What Works](#) (July 2023) | The Cares Family

[Loneliness interventions across the life-course: executive summary](#) (September 2023) | GOV.UK

[Interventions to manage loneliness at an individual and community level](#) (August 2024) | Australian Psychology Society

[Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults](#) (February 2020) | National Academy of Sciences

[Dutch Supermarket Starts 'Slow Checkout Lane' For Elderly Who Want To Chat | by Donya Rouzbehi](#) (March 2024) | Medium

[NHS receptionists combat loneliness](#) (January 2024) | Practice Business

Built Environment

[Socially Connected Communities: Solutions for Social Isolation](#) (March 2021) | Healthy Places by Design

[Kinship in the City: Urban loneliness and the built environment](#) (November 2019) | Future Spaces Foundation

[The role of transport in tackling loneliness](#) (September 2024) | GOV.UK

[What we gain by building more homes in the right places](#) (February 2024) | NSW Productivity Commission

- Use density to enhance amenity and character (p39)
- Focus on accessible, quality open space, not ratios (p41)

[Building more homes where infrastructure costs less](#) (August 2023) | NSW Productivity Commission

- The importance of access to quality public open space (Section 3.5.1)

[Greener Places](#) (2020) | NSW Government Architect

- Establishes a framework for greener places

[Healthy Higher Density Living for Families with Children: An Advocacy, Planning and Design Guide](#) (August 2024) | Western Sydney Local Health District Centre for Population Health

[Using Design to Connect Us](#) (2021) | Loneliness Lab

- Jointly developed by LendLease and Collectively, sets out design conditions for connected places, and provides case studies.

Public Awareness Campaigns

[William and Kate send message to tackle loneliness](#) (13 May 2022) | BBC

[A Prescription For Nature](#) (October 2024) | WWF ([LinkedIn post](#))

[5 Mental Health Campaigns That Are Making A Difference](#) (16 April 2024) | GWI

Policy from other Jurisdictions

United Kingdom

[A connected society: a strategy for tackling loneliness](#) (October 2018) | GOV.UK

[Tackling Loneliness annual report March 2023: the fourth year](#) (30 March 2023) | GOV.UK

[A new call to action: Tackling loneliness and building community](#) (September 2023) | British Red Cross

["Fresh thinking" needed on loneliness](#) (28 September 2023) | British Red Cross

[APPG on Tackling Loneliness and Connected Communities](#) (January 2023) | Campaign to End Loneliness

United States

[A Framework for a National Strategy to Advance Social Connection](#) (30 July 2024) | US Surgeon General

Victoria

[Ageing is everyone's business - a report on social isolation and loneliness among senior Victorians](#) (2016) and [Government response](#) (2016)

[Parliamentary inquiry into support for older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds](#) (2022) and [Government response](#) (2023)

Queensland

[Report No. 14, 57th Parliament - Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland](#) (2021)

[Communities 2032 Strategy](#) (2024)

[Grants to address loneliness and social isolation](#) (2024)