

QUEENSLAND FAMILIES AND  
COMMUNITIES ASSOCIATION

☎ 0422 888 059

✉ gm@qfca.org.au

🌐 www.qfca.org.au

# Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in Queensland.

Submission prepared by:

Queensland Families and Communities Association

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## Executive Summary

The Queensland Families and Communities Association (QFCA) is the peak body for 140 Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCCs) around the state. Currently 95% of Neighbourhood Centres funded by the Queensland Government are members of the organisation. Queensland's Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCC's) are key social infrastructure that reduce loneliness and social isolation around the state. By their very nature, their core purpose is to build connection, belonging, participation and inclusion in local communities. Their place-based community development approach means they have unique insights into local expressions of loneliness and social isolation and are able to co-design responses utilising community resources, networks and partnerships.

Neighbourhood Centre activities are evidence based and build social capital in localities. Their welcoming and inclusive nature means they are especially effective in supporting vulnerable and marginalised groups and emerging issues.

Queensland's Neighbourhood Centre Sector are uniquely positioned to be a central component to any future strategy implemented by the Queensland Government to tackle loneliness and social isolation. In order to enhance the effectiveness of NCC's and reduce the loneliness epidemic across the state, further strategies must see increased NCC investment into operational funding, physical and digital infrastructure, a communications campaign placing NCC's at the centre of community connection and further investment into NCC's peak body, the Queensland Families and Communities Association (QFCA).

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# 1. Introduction

Queensland’s Neighbourhood and Community Centres are the heart of communities.

Every year, 1.83 million Queenslanders are welcomed through the doors of a Neighbourhood Centre across the state regardless of their gender, background, sexuality, religion, age or social status. This universal open-door approach to supporting communities is the foundation of every Neighbourhood Centre’s operations, whether they be located in Metropolitan Brisbane, a local town in the South West Downs or a far North Queensland community.

The Queensland Families and Communities Association (QFCA) is the peak body for 140 Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCCs) around the state (Map A). Currently 95% of Neighbourhood Centres funded by the Queensland Government are members of the organisation. The QFCA is part of the National Peak Body ANHCA (Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association) which represents over 1000 NCCs across the nation. Neighbourhood and Community Centres are part of the overall International Settlement House movement which has been growing throughout western nations for the past 140 years and has consultative status at the United Nations through the International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres (IFS).



Map A: Neighbourhood Centres in Queensland

The foundation of every Neighbourhood Centre in Queensland and across the globe is local connection, belonging, participation and inclusion. By their very nature, Neighbourhood and Community Centres are designed to decrease loneliness and social isolation in local communities, particularly for those in vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, yet are hamstrung by limited funding.

The QFCA will outline in this submission for the Inquiry, that the fundamental aspect of Neighbourhood Centres as place-based social infrastructure is addressing the issue of social isolation and loneliness in individuals and communities. Neighbourhood Centres do this through “locals helping locals” approaches - co-designing programs with local communities, establishing groups that build social capital and creating warm universal access points for all community members, regardless of background or circumstance. **Investing in Neighbourhood Centres is the answer.**

## 2. The Loneliness Epidemic (TOR 1)

The research into the extent and effects of Loneliness and Social Isolation in Australia has been explored in detail by the Australian Neighbourhood House movement, specifically in the paper “Social Isolation and Loneliness - A Neighbourhood House Perspective”, NHVic, 2020<sup>1</sup>. Whilst research into this subject area by the Australian Psychological Society 2018<sup>2</sup>, Relationships Australia 2018<sup>3</sup> and Ending Loneliness Together 2020<sup>4</sup> gives some overarching insight into the “loneliness epidemic” in Australia much of this research is broad and limited in scope. The health and economic effects of loneliness have largely been drawn from international research.

Neighbourhood and Community Centres are hubs of local knowledge. Settlement and Neighbourhood Houses have always had an emphasis on offering programs and responses uniquely tailored to issues in their locality as no two communities are identical<sup>5</sup>. Their networks with community groups, individuals, businesses, Government, faith organisations and schools mean they have a unique insight into the landscape of local communities and act as a “canary in the coalmine” as issues emerge in localities. Therefore, insights into the effects and causes of loneliness and social isolation offered by Neighbourhood Centres are as diverse as the communities in which they are located. This local-level knowledge was clear in the interviews and focus groups held as part of QFCA’s consultation process for writing this submission.

For example, while literature states that those aged 65-70 are the least lonely of all Australians<sup>6</sup>, some Neighbourhood Centres in rural areas indicate that this demographic is the most socially isolated of all their demographics<sup>7</sup>. Rural NCC workers attribute this to less access to infrastructure, less confidence with driving, lack of public transport and living on large farmland. Other Neighbourhood Centres in suburban areas identify that Loneliness and Social Isolation is experienced “across the board” while experiencing considerable engagement with older demographics. Many Neighbourhood Centres recognise that life transitions, particularly separation due to family breakdown or domestic violence is a significant issue for those who have lost social relationships. Those experiencing mental illness, marginalisation and homelessness, particularly men, are noted by Neighbourhood Centres in other localities.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nhvic.org.au/faqs/loneliness-social-isolation-and-neighbourhood-houses>

<sup>2</sup> <https://researchbank.swinburne.edu.au/items/c1d9cd16-ddbe-417f-bbc4-3d499e95bdec/1/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://relationships.org.au/pdfs/copy\\_of\\_Anepidemicofloneliness20012017.pdf](https://relationships.org.au/pdfs/copy_of_Anepidemicofloneliness20012017.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://endingloneliness.com.au/news-events/ending-loneliness-together-in-australia-white-paper/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.qfca.org.au/neighbourhood-centres>

<sup>6</sup> <https://researchbank.swinburne.edu.au/items/c1d9cd16-ddbe-417f-bbc4-3d499e95bdec/1/>

<sup>7</sup> QFCA Online NCC Consultation 20<sup>th</sup> July 2021

Neighbourhood Centres are not defined by a service to a target demographic, but by an approach which is driven by the community itself. Neighbourhood Centre's universal, catch-all nature means that centres support community members from the 'cradle to grave' and are often the first point of contact for those experiencing major life transitions. As loneliness and social isolation manifests itself in a variety of ways in local communities, Neighbourhood Centres respond in ways relevant to that local community.

Neighbourhood Centres across Queensland know first-hand the effects of loneliness and social isolation, as they are often the first point of contact for those experiencing these conditions. Centres indicate that many experiencing loneliness may present at the centre for other reasons – support with housing, emergency relief, family issues, English lessons or employment assistance. Throughout the course of engagement, social isolation is often identified as one of the many factors an individual may be experiencing. The wide variety of interconnected groups at Neighbourhood Centres means that people's individual interests and needs can be matched to existing groups, either internally or externally. Should a particular interest group not exist in a community, Neighbourhood Centres can use community development approaches to gather together like-minded community members to establish a new group.

Centres rarely identify loneliness with surveys, research or direct recruitment of "lonely" individuals. The welcoming, friendly nature of centres means that issues of loneliness are identified over a cup of tea, a conversation and relationships with community members and stakeholder groups. Neighbourhood Centres know that forming connections with isolated community members cannot be performed through service specific programs or through a formulaic process, but only with genuine human concern and an attentive listening ear. Most importantly, NCCs offer meaningful opportunities to connect and contribute at a local community level, which means that individuals do not have to self-identify or disclose that they are "lonely" to access a welcoming community space.

**Neighbourhood Centres identify loneliness and social isolation by having an open door, a welcoming presence and an empathetic ear to local community experiences.**

## 2.1 COVID 19 and Neighbourhood Centres

**Neighbourhood Centres have acted as a "social vaccine" throughout the pandemic**, minimising the negative effects of lockdowns and physical distancing in local communities through various forms of online and phone connection and by reconnecting people in physical spaces when restrictions are lifted. Due to their local networks and knowledge of communities, Neighbourhood Centres know which people are most vulnerable to social isolation during restrictions and can implement strategies to check in on these individuals and demographics<sup>8</sup>.

During COVID 19 restrictions, Neighbourhood and Community Centres worked closely with the Queensland Government in responding to socially isolated people. The identification of people with pre-existing medical conditions and those over the age of 70 being most at risk of death from COVID 19 meant that these demographics are instantly susceptible to social isolation during lockdowns. This has a compounding effect on those over the age of 75, who had already experienced high rates of loneliness<sup>9</sup>.

Through Neighbourhood Centre regional network meetings, QFCA identified that many Neighbourhood Centres also responded to the Queensland Governments' "Care Army" initiative,

<sup>8</sup> QFCA Online NCC Consultation 20<sup>th</sup> July 2021

<sup>9</sup> [https://relationships.org.au/pdfs/copy\\_of\\_Anepidemicofloneliness20012017.pdf](https://relationships.org.au/pdfs/copy_of_Anepidemicofloneliness20012017.pdf)

enlisting new volunteers to deliver essential medicines and groceries to those most in need. Neighbourhood Centres such as Encircle Redcliffe Neighbourhood Centre continue to operate a Care Army Program with 11 local Care Army Volunteers who have provided 1537 food parcels to members of the community. They report that during lockdowns, community members stated that interaction with a volunteer was the only conversation or human face they had seen, so they became their support system and connection to further neighbourhood centre support. Donations for the Care Army program were not only sourced from OzHarvest, but also donations from the local community creating further opportunities for social connection and participation.

Other Neighbourhood Centres coordinated their own teams, using staff members and existing centre volunteers to respond with emergency relief and medication deliveries as well as make contact through phone calls and forms of digital media. Some community members were referred to Neighbourhood Centres through the Queensland Government's Community Recovery hotline.

The move to many forms of videoconferencing for community members, particularly older individuals, required extra support from Neighbourhood Centres to help those experiencing digital illiteracy to "get connected" to family and online forms of community programming that were conducted in place of in-person activities<sup>10</sup>. For many Neighbourhood Centres, activities such as Playgroups, English and Yoga Classes were moved to online platforms to ensure that groups stayed connected with one another.

It was noted that many other social service providers in Queensland's Human services sector ceased operations, even in digital forms, during some lockdown periods.

### 3. Causes of Loneliness and Social Isolation in Queensland (TOR 2)

The underlying causes and drivers of loneliness and social isolation in Queensland communities are as diverse as the local expressions of them. **Neighbourhood Centres understand the causes and solutions for loneliness and social isolation using a local place-based lens.**

While Baker (2012)<sup>11</sup> notes that little difference exists between geographic areas with people's experience of loneliness, the experience of Neighbourhood Centres in rural and remote areas of Queensland indicates a difference in the underlying causes of social isolation than those in city populations. The QFCA's research of drought-affected areas in Western Queensland notes that farmers in rural communities doing it tough often experience mental health and financial issues, however, cultural stigma exists in asking for help<sup>12</sup>. This sense of pride and considering others more worthy of support is often a barrier for socially isolated people to build reciprocal relationships with others. Neighbourhood Centres in rural areas indicate that as they build relationships with these individuals, this stigma can be negotiated around so individuals are more willing to accept support and connection from others. Other rural Neighbourhood Centres run events, expos and dinners to encourage socially isolated farmer to spend time with one another and raise issues of mental health and the importance of social connections.

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<sup>10</sup> QFCA Online NCC Consultation 20<sup>th</sup> July 2021

<sup>11</sup> <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/all-the-lonely-people-loneliness-in-australia-2001-2009/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.qfca.org.au/drought-project>

Other Neighbourhood Centres have noted that the causes of loneliness are often associated with the busy-ness of modern society, especially those with significant caring duties for children and those with disabilities. It is noted that single parents struggle to maintain work/life balance as they move from employment, to school and children's activities without time to build deep connections with others on an individual level or in group activities. It is also noted by centres that single parents affected by domestic violence are also considerably affected by loneliness and social isolation. Separation from abusive partners includes separation from numerous social relationships formed in the context of the relationship and requires "starting over" in building new friendships. Likewise, Neighbourhood Centres identify high levels of loneliness and social isolation in men living alone and experiencing separation from a partner or children.

While anecdotal evidence of increased use of social media is correlated with increases in loneliness, Neighbourhood Centres emphasise that online spaces need to support in-person physical interaction. Online interaction in and of itself is observed as being insufficient to build quality relationships that reduce loneliness in individuals. In order to ensure that digital interactions support in person interactions, Neighbourhood Centres have developed hybrid models of community participation throughout COVID-19 restrictions. For example, during the lockdown period one neighbourhood centre transitioned their art group to an online Facebook community for social connection, creative projects and peer support, coupled with 1-on-1 walks between the art facilitator and individual participants to enable discussion about both art and coping during a pandemic.

Mental illness and disability are also noted as actors contributing to reduced social connection with others. Research indicates that 88% of Qld NCC's deal with mental illness crisis presentations and 50% offer services to those with disabilities<sup>13</sup>. Numerous opportunities are offered to these demographics to connect with others at the centre through volunteering opportunities or general activities.

Another perspective from Neighbourhood Centre stakeholders is that a driver of social isolation and disconnection in Queensland may be the focus on transactional service delivery rather than wholistic Community Development. Community Development is a 'locals helping locals' approach, usually guided by Community Development practitioners, in which social issues are addressed on a grassroots level from the 'bottom up'. Principles of participation and self-direction are strongly associated with the practice, ensuring that no one is left behind in processes of long-term sustainable change. In contrast to Community Development are service delivery approaches, which are top-down, short-term processes provided to individuals to immediately address a presenting crisis.

Community Development methods featured strongly in the Australian Assistance Program in the early 1970's, launching much of the Australian Neighbourhood Centre movement<sup>14</sup>. Community Development and the Neighbourhood Centre sector continued to grow over the following decades. However a decline in Community Development practice was particularly noticed in 2013 during the Newman Government in which private enterprise, corporate-style structures in human services were encouraged and long-term community-based initiatives faced severe funding cuts. The reduced funding of Neighbourhood Centres is particularly noted.

QFCA in partnership with Griffith University have noted that a renewed interest in place-based initiatives and a growing awareness of service delivery shortcomings have revitalised interest in

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.qcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Neighbourhood-Centre-IMS-Report-FINAL-for-web-1.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.qfca.org.au/neighbourhood-centres>

Community Development initiatives<sup>15</sup>. However, while this hunger for more place-based community development exists in the sector, it lacks considerable resources in the areas of training, mentoring and research. Funding for Community Development is limited. Social policy changes are required to ensure that inclusive, participatory methods of social response are delivered alongside of service delivery models to maintain social cohesion, connection and community-based solutions.

## 4. Neighbourhood Centres - Infrastructure for Social Connection (TOR 3)

**Neighbourhood Centres are core, place-based social infrastructure, mitigating the effects of loneliness and social isolation. They are a proven protective factor in reducing loneliness and social isolation across the state.**

For over 140 years, the international Settlement House movement has featured community participation and support hubs in the centre of geographical districts. In Australia, the Neighbourhood House movement was specifically born out of a federal social policy with a focus on local community participation – The Australian Assistance Plan<sup>16</sup>. By their very nature, Neighbourhood Centres across Australia and in Queensland have been **established as key social infrastructure to foster connection, belonging, participation and inclusion**. Their place-based nature and local networks make them hubs from which the fabric of local communities are built and supported.

Neighbourhood Centres have been identified as vital Community Gateways in the Logan Together Initiative<sup>17</sup>. Logan Together is a whole of community place-based project with the aim of increasing life opportunities for young people. Logan Together note that Community Gateways such as NCC's are essential components of any place-based work as they are:

- **Spaces and services any community member can use.** Anybody who arrives at the door will be welcomed and offered a service that may be appropriate for them. Access is only limited by the capacity of the space or service to host people and activities, and by the need to ensure other users are safe and welcome.
- **Place-based and community-run with a strong focus on community development.** A number of complementary activities typically take place at the same location, and users of the service may move between different activities over time while staying connected to the place, or may dip in and out of use of the space depending on their needs at any particular time.
- **Build strong and resilient communities** through strengthening community networks and facilitating community initiatives on shared priorities.
- **Pathways to further assistance** – they help those who access community gateways to find other more specialised services where they need and want these.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.qfca.org.au/community-development-subcommittee>

<sup>16</sup> <https://news.flinders.edu.au/blog/2018/03/13/social-policy-develops-super-power/>

<sup>17</sup> [https://logantgether.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/200227\\_CommunityGateways\\_OperatingFramework\\_Final-1.pdf](https://logantgether.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/200227_CommunityGateways_OperatingFramework_Final-1.pdf)

Logan Together further highlights the important role that Community Development plays through Community Gateways, having significant implications for the reduction of Loneliness and Social Isolation in vulnerable communities:

*“Research suggests that strong trusting relationships are a key to families engaging with supports, particularly those families who are experiencing the most disadvantage and who may not normally seek assistance. Doing so in a community development context enables them to engage as active participants rather than passive service recipients, and to work at building community responses to the issues they are facing. Many Gateway workers would frame this in terms of social capital. They think of ‘bonding capital’ where strong bonds and relationships are built between people in similar groups (for instance, people of the same culture or the same age) and ‘bridging capital’ where bonds are built and strengthened outside the most comfortable social groupings (for instance, across generations or across cultures”<sup>18</sup>.*

Neighbourhood Centre operational structures are inherently participatory in nature, leveraging local individual and community assets to stretch their resources further into communities.

Neighbourhood Centres are predominately governed by local community boards, comprised of community representatives and volunteers with expertise in non-profit operations, local knowledge, lived expertise and other valuable skills. Research conducted by QFCA in 2020 indicates that an estimated 860 people served on Neighbourhood Centre committees across the state. This contributes 33,780 hours to community centre governance over a 12-month period<sup>19</sup>.

Whilst 127 Neighbourhood Centres receive an average of \$134,000 from the Queensland Government as part of the Neighbourhood Centre program, Neighbourhood Centres are independent community-based organisations that rely heavily on local resources which inherently come with community connections. Many Neighbourhood Centres apply Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) techniques to leverage small amounts of funding so they can conduct broad community programs. Asset Based Community Development identifies the strengths, assets and resources in local communities and activates these to address identified issues<sup>20</sup>. These assets and resources may include local volunteers and experts, external organisational assets or local sources of funding and physical assets to run programs in partnership with the community. These community driven and leveraged Neighbourhood Centre structures stand in stark contrast to more corporate human services structures which have little community involvement and rely heavily on large funding contracts to deliver case management and crisis responses. Neighbourhood Centres in Queensland create \$4.08 of social value for every dollar invested by the Queensland Government.

Neighbourhood Centres also provide physical infrastructure conducive to building social connections and capital. Karg et. al. 2021<sup>21</sup> have taken a Strengths Based Approach to addressing issues of social isolation by identifying different types of social infrastructure that are pro connection and pro-integration. While Neighbourhood Centres predominately fit into the “Community Group” category, it is clear that centres across Queensland provide a variety of pro-connection spaces in all of the categories identified in the literature review. These include:

<sup>18</sup> [https://logantgether.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/200227\\_CommunityGateways\\_OperatingFramework\\_Final-1.pdf](https://logantgether.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/200227_CommunityGateways_OperatingFramework_Final-1.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.qfca.org.au/survey-results>

<sup>20</sup> [https://logantgether.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/200227\\_CommunityGateways\\_OperatingFramework\\_Final-1.pdf](https://logantgether.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/200227_CommunityGateways_OperatingFramework_Final-1.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2021-07/apo-nid309682.pdf>

- **Third Spaces** – Informal and formal meeting places that aren't work or home that allow individuals to be social. Many Neighbourhood Centres feature Community Gardens, Community Cafés and Toy Libraries, facilitating social attachments through spontaneous opportunities for conversation and the sharing of challenges and successes.
- **Bumping Places** – These are places that allow for incidental encounters in open spaces, such as park facilities or sculptures. NCC's in Qld have established "Red Benches" for DV intervention<sup>22</sup>, "Talking Benches" in town centres<sup>23</sup>, Yarn Bombing installations in local parks, mosaics and other community art installations.
- **Ephemeral Places** – Temporal events such as festivals and pop-ups. Neighbourhood Centres run many once off events such as Family Fun Days, employment expos, markets and carnivals creating common social identity and shared community life.
- **Community Groups** – These spaces unite individuals around a common cause and create enormous opportunities for social connection. As well as Neighbourhood Centres themselves being a local community-based organisation, they support and auspice a huge number of community subgroups onsite and offsite that are pro-connection and pro-integration.
- **Online and Hybrid Spaces** – Online spaces connect individuals through social media and video conferences while hybrid spaces connect the online with the offline. Neighbourhood Centres adapted their model during COVID19 restrictions to connect communities in online spaces. Many Neighbourhood Centre playgroups, yoga groups and other activities continued to be offered in a virtual environment throughout lockdowns, with some of these groups moving between physical and virtual models to ensure community connection continued during changes in restrictions.

QFCA consultation illustrates that in some regional and remote localities, Neighbourhood Centres provide vital infrastructure of high value and use to the community. Neighbourhood Centres provide Centrelink outlets, post-disaster facilities, training rooms for local business and meeting rooms for community committees in towns which lack this type of infrastructure. The availability of this space not only provides opportunities for social connection, but opportunities for Neighbourhood Centres to link community members with other local opportunities for community participation through their local networks.

## 5. Successful Neighbourhood Centre Initiatives (TOR 4a)

Neighbourhood Centres use unique Community Development methods to address Loneliness and Social Isolation that are highly effective and co-designed with local communities. Because Neighbourhood Centres have specialised local knowledge of their communities, they not only have their "ear to the ground" for emerging expressions of loneliness and social isolation but can build solutions by linking together local groups.

Some examples of local Neighbourhood Centre responses to emerging issues of loneliness and social isolation are featured here:

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.bundabergnow.com/2020/11/25/red-bench-unveiled-to-stand-against-domestic-violence/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-09/buderim-chat-seat-connecting-community/12856842>

### Case study: Social Prescribing at Mount Gravatt Community Centre<sup>24</sup>

*In 2018, Mount Gravatt Community Centre worked with the Queensland Community Alliance to identify local issues of concern for community members. Loneliness and social isolation were identified as key issues and a working group was established with local stakeholders. With research assistance from the University of Queensland and funding from the Queensland Government, a Social Prescribing network entitled “Ways to Wellness” was established through the Neighbourhood Centre in 2019.*

*Social Prescription is a service system developed in the UK as an adjunct to primary care services. It is defined as “a mechanism for linking patients with non-medical sources of support within the community” (Chatterjee et al, 2018<sup>25</sup>). Through the employment of a Community Link Worker, the Ways to Wellness program at Mount Gravatt Community Centre takes referrals from local organisations, GPs and Allied Health Professionals who have contact with individuals identified as Socially isolated. The Community Link Worker connects these individuals to meaningful group programs and activities that feature social connection. These activities may be based at the Neighbourhood Centre itself or be external from the centre in the wide range of local partnerships and networks the centre has. Research on the mental and physical health outcomes as the result of reduced social isolation in individuals on the Ways to Wellness program is conducted by the University of Queensland’s Psychology Department.*

*Social Prescribing programs in Neighbourhood Centres have also been implemented at Redland Community Centre and several Neighbourhood House Networks in Victoria<sup>26</sup>.*

### Case study: Community driven flood recovery in Yeronga

*In 2011, the innercity Brisbane suburb of Yeronga was badly affected by flooding, with over 5000 people directly affected. With no existing community centre in place, the Yeronga Flood Recovery Centre was rapidly established by community volunteers in order to support flood-affected residents to connect, rest and refresh, and to coordinate recovery efforts and supports. Melinda, volunteer flood recovery manager and now Community Development worker at Yeronga Community Centre, recalls;*

*“We used to call ourselves the Hub. People would come in and tell us – their community - what they needed, and the Hub volunteers would find people and organisations who had the time, effort, goods, compassion and/or willingness to help”.*

*The role of the centre in identifying and responding to local level needs was critical, and responding to social isolation and loneliness amidst disaster and its aftermath was a core component of this need. One “floodie”, as residents affected by the disaster call themselves, reflects that,*

*“I got heaps from the centre with regards to support and friendship. I got peace of mind... [community volunteers] came and sat with me and listened. I liked talking to everyone and not always about the flood. The centre was my place of solace.<sup>27</sup>”*

*Initially a short-term response, the critical role of the Centre in providing community members with a sense of belonging and connection quickly became apparent. The community successfully lobbied for funding to open a permanent neighbourhood centre, with Yeronga Community Centre emerging out of the floodwater. Ten years later, social connections and friendships forged out of the floods remain*

<sup>24</sup> <https://waystowellness.org.au/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17533015.2017.1334002>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.chanh.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Paper-Codesigning-Wellbeing-Scripts-16-07-2020-1-1.pdf>  
<https://baysidecommunitycentres.org.au/neighbourhood-houses-and-social-prescribing-july-2019/>

<sup>27</sup> Walking the path to recovery: the story of Yeronga Flood Recovery Centre / Fiona McLeod and Annie Wright. ; co-editors Sandra McLeod and Melinda McInturff.

*a core part of the Community Centre. This is evident in that many of the original community flood recovery volunteers and “floodies” were a key part of the COVID-19 response that Yeronga Community Centre developed to support socially isolated and vulnerable residents.*

### **Case Study: Pets for Life at Caloundra Community Centre<sup>28</sup>**

*In 2008, the Sunshine Coast Animal Refuge approached Caloundra Community Centre with concerns that a number of older people in the area were being forced to surrender their pets as they faced increased physical challenges with ageing. Caloundra Community Centre established a working group with local community stakeholders and identified that many older individuals experienced high levels of social isolation and loneliness that was reduced significantly by continued pet companionship. A “Pets for Life” program was established in 2009 by the Caloundra Community Centre in which local volunteers were recruited to assist older pet owners with pet care tasks such as dog walking and litter tray changing.*

*Neighbourhood Centre Volunteers supported older people to continue having a companion pet, as well as reduced social isolation in both the volunteer and pet owner through community connection. In addition, the volunteer also acted as a conduit between older people isolated in the community and activities offered at the Neighbourhood Centre which further reduced isolation.*

*The program has continued to operate for 11 years, supporting 180 pet owners and 250 volunteers. It is currently self-funded by the Caloundra Community Centre.*

These case studies highlight numerous important and successful elements of the NCC place-based Community Development work, including:

- The issue is identified by the community itself
- NCC’s play a key role in bringing community groups together and listening to issues raised
- NCC’s facilitate community discussion between groups
- Programs are co-designed with community input. Extra professional help is brought in where local resources are lacking (Professionals are “on tap, not on top”).
- Local Community resources are leveraged to increase participation
- The community plays a key role in being the solution to their own problem
- NCC work is evaluated for effectiveness, usually by forming partnerships with research institutions and other stakeholders.

## 6. Loneliness & Social Isolation Measurement Tools (TOR 4b)

Successful measurement tools on the impact of Neighbourhood and Community Centres in addressing Loneliness and Social Isolation have been developed by peak bodies in both Victoria and Queensland, as well as by NCC’s on a local level.

Research conducted by Neighbourhood Houses Victoria has used participant measurement tools to determine the social connection benefit of neighbourhood house activities. A survey of over 47,000 neighbourhood house participants in Victoria found that 57 per cent report benefits that relate directly to forming social connections (meet new people / make friends) and/or maintaining social

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.petsforlife.org.au/>

connections (spend time with other people) (Perry & Richards, 2019<sup>29</sup>). This research measured the social connection benefits for Neighbourhood House attendees across a variety age groups and demographics activities, including service delivery and job training:

- Social Groups: 85.8% received social connection benefit
- Exercise/Health Class: 61.2% received social connection benefit
- Support Group: 75.1% received social connection benefit
- Advice/Help: 62.5% received social connection benefit
- Playgroup/Childcare: 69.2% received social connection benefit
- Course/Class: 59.2% received social connection benefit
- Volunteer/Student Placement: 61.7% received social connection benefit
- Job Training: 47.7% received social connection benefit
- Use a service: 41.3% received social connection benefit

This data has been utilised in a Social Return on Investment Analysis by Deloitte Access Economics into a number of Victorian Neighbourhood Houses, calculating Quality of Adjusted Life Years for participants. At Morwell Neighbourhood House in 2017, Deloitte calculated the Quality of Life gain associated with improved social connection was an estimated total of \$393,762 for 188 participants<sup>30</sup>. This methodology has been applied in the Queensland context during QFCA's Annual Survey in 2020<sup>31</sup> and is further expanded upon in **Section 7**.

Further research conducted by Neighbourhood Houses Victoria revealed that some demographics received more social benefit from Neighbourhood Centres than other demographics. Demographic groups which experience higher rates of social connection benefits at Neighbourhood Houses than other demographics included concession card holders, men, First Nations people, those with a disability and English as a second language<sup>32</sup>.

In 2020, the QFCA designed a measurement and reporting framework for Neighbourhood Centres that included the capacity to gather participant data about increased social connection<sup>33</sup>. Due to the soft entry approach of Neighbourhood Centres, participants often "call in" to centres for a range of reasons creating incidental opportunities for further community involvement. QFCA identified that case management measurement tools and practitioner reporting were less reliable and too intrusive in such circumstances. Research indicated that participant feedback is generally considered to be a more authentic reflection of individual social connection outcomes and could be gathered as sample data in annual or twice annual survey weeks at all Neighbourhood Centres across the state.

QFCA's Reporting and Measurement Framework for Neighbourhood Centres, designed in partnership with the Queensland Government in 2020, can use this social connection data to produce best practice outcome measurements consistent with Quality of Life measurements developed by the Federal Government, SEIFA, OECD and NZ Treasury Living Standards<sup>34</sup>. QFCA has a

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.nhvic.org.au/participants-survey>

<sup>30</sup> [https://e947a178-42a7-4d9d-b5dc-097a78a61699.filesusr.com/ugd/0cc9dc\\_129fd806b0724fd981ffca16bd106410.pdf](https://e947a178-42a7-4d9d-b5dc-097a78a61699.filesusr.com/ugd/0cc9dc_129fd806b0724fd981ffca16bd106410.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.qfca.org.au/survey-results>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.nhvic.org.au/faqs/loneliness-social-isolation-and-neighbourhood-houses>

<sup>33</sup> Performance and Reporting Framework Project, QFCA August 2020. (Unreleased Report – DCHDE Document)

<sup>34</sup> Performance and Reporting Framework Project, QFCA August 2020. (Unreleased Report – DCHDE Document)

ready-made measurement tool and implementation plan to measure and track place-based social connection across the Neighbourhood Centre sector throughout the entire state.

Numerous Neighbourhood Centres in Queensland have developed other individual measurement and evaluation tools. Of particular note is Redbank Plains Community Centre's Impact Evaluation study with the support of Ipswich City Council<sup>35</sup>, Mount Gravatt's Social Prescribing Evaluation Partnership with the University of Queensland and Participant Surveys developed by Caloundra Community Centre.

## 7. Leveraging Neighbourhood Centres (TOR 5a)

Queensland Neighbourhood Centres are already vital, place-based social infrastructure embedded in communities across Queensland. Neighbourhood Centres are actively reducing loneliness and social isolation through community support by providing activities that build social capacity and conducting community development activities driven by local people. Neighbourhood Centres engage a significant proportion of Queensland's population and produce significant outcomes for individuals and communities experiencing social isolation and loneliness.

Research conducted by the QFCA in 2020<sup>36</sup> estimates that 35,245 Queenslanders visit a Neighbourhood Centre each week, equating to 1,832,740 people per year. 54% (980,824) of Neighbourhood Centre visitors participated in programmed activities at the centres. Using Deloitte Access Economics methodology<sup>37</sup> to calculate the economic value of social connections produced by Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria, the overall annual figure for Queensland's Neighbourhood Centres was \$42,831,494 million. In addition to this value, Neighbourhood Centres delivered a further \$34,969,287 in social value through the delivery of services such as volunteering, emergency relief, internet access, auspicing and community support activities resulting in a social value total of over \$77.8 million. This research indicates at least \$4.08 of social value for every dollar invested by the DCDSS into the Neighbourhood Centre program<sup>38</sup>.

In addition to Neighbourhood Centre participation, Centres often run community events such as markets, family fun days, expos and similar once-off activities, creating ideal opportunities for social interaction. 159,872 Queenslanders participate in these NCC events each year.

An additional strength of Neighbourhood Centres is the symbiotic relationship they have with local networks and stakeholders, including local businesses, faith-based organisations, schools, Local Government and community groups. Queensland's Neighbourhood Centres have a total of 1656 formal partnerships with other stakeholders. This enables Neighbourhood Centres to be holders of local knowledge about Neighbourhoods that are an incredible resource when addressing issues of loneliness and social isolation. The sector provides room and hall infrastructure to 1522 community groups across the state per month and a further 661 community groups are supported through a variety of other means.

Volunteering also plays a major role in centres, creating enormous opportunities for community members experiencing loneliness and social isolation. Despite little funding for volunteer

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.shapeyouripswich.com.au/redbank-plains-community-centre>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.qfca.org.au/survey-results>

<sup>37</sup> [https://e947a178-42a7-4d9d-b5dc-097a78a61699.filesusr.com/ugd/0cc9dc\\_129fd806b0724fd981ffca16bd106410.pdf](https://e947a178-42a7-4d9d-b5dc-097a78a61699.filesusr.com/ugd/0cc9dc_129fd806b0724fd981ffca16bd106410.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.qfca.org.au/survey-results>

recruitment, management and supervision, 2255 people per week volunteer at Neighbourhood Centres contributing 544 440 hours per year (labour replacement cost \$23,405,475.60). Flood (2005<sup>39</sup>) identifies that loneliness is lower in people who spend some time each week volunteering.

The wide variety of activities offered at Neighbourhood Centres often means that some community members are engaged in a primary activity in the centre, but have underlying needs for social connection. For example, Deception Bay Neighbourhood Centre recently commenced a Community Garden group. The group attracted some people experiencing intellectual disabilities, migrants and retired people. As the group began to meet around the garden regularly, they discovered that very little gardening was done and large amounts of time were spent talking and chatting with one another. The group began to recognise that the real purpose of their group was not gardening, but reducing social isolation. The group renamed itself as “The Chatter Garden” and has begun envisioning other activities such as international cooking groups to further engage with isolated members of the local community. Deception Bay Neighbourhood Centre also identified that some socially isolated community members were dropping into the centre for basic forms of emergency relief on certain days of each week, picking up milk or bread as part of their weekly ritual to connect with others. The welcoming space that Neighbourhood Centres provide means that even transactional interactions with Neighbourhood Centres turn into opportunities for individuals to reduce their sense of loneliness and foster connections with their local community.

QFCA is one of Relationship Australia’s “Very Neighbourly Organisations” and as such sees considerable participation from Queensland’s Neighbourhood Centres in *Neighbour Day*. This initiative sees QFCA and Queensland Neighbourhood Centres collaborate with a variety of other organisations to decrease Loneliness and Social Isolation in local Neighbourhoods through social connection activities, not just once a year with Neighbour Day activities but throughout the year.

In addition to Neighbour Day, Queensland Neighbourhood Centres participate in National Neighbourhood Centre Week with over 1000 Neighbourhood Houses across Australia. 2021’s theme was “Loneliness: The Answer is Community” and featured advertising and events encouraging community members to participate and recognise the role of Neighbourhood Centres in reducing Loneliness through community building activities.

NCC’s are an ideal existing pro-social connection and pro-participation model that can be leveraged by the Qld Government with further investment. They have massive reach into communities across the state and further investment can exponentially increase the reach they already demonstrate.

## 8. Supporting Vulnerable Groups (TOR 5b)

Neighbourhood Centres in Queensland have identified and work with a number of vulnerable groups particularly affected by Social Isolation and Loneliness.

Focus groups with Neighbourhood Centres identified that those from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds are at higher risk of social isolation due to being less confident with English, being separated from international family members and not having familiar cultural groups around them. This can be further compounded by discrimination and racism.

<sup>39</sup> <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/mapping-loneliness-in-australia/>

Neighbourhood Centres have further identified other vulnerable groups in communities and have specifically designed programs with these demographics in order to target their unique needs. The table below outlines vulnerable demographics identified by NCC’s in the QFCA’s research in 2020<sup>40</sup>, and the percentage of Neighbourhood Centres working with those demographics in co-design (Table A).

**Table A: Co-designed Neighbourhood Centre services by demographic**

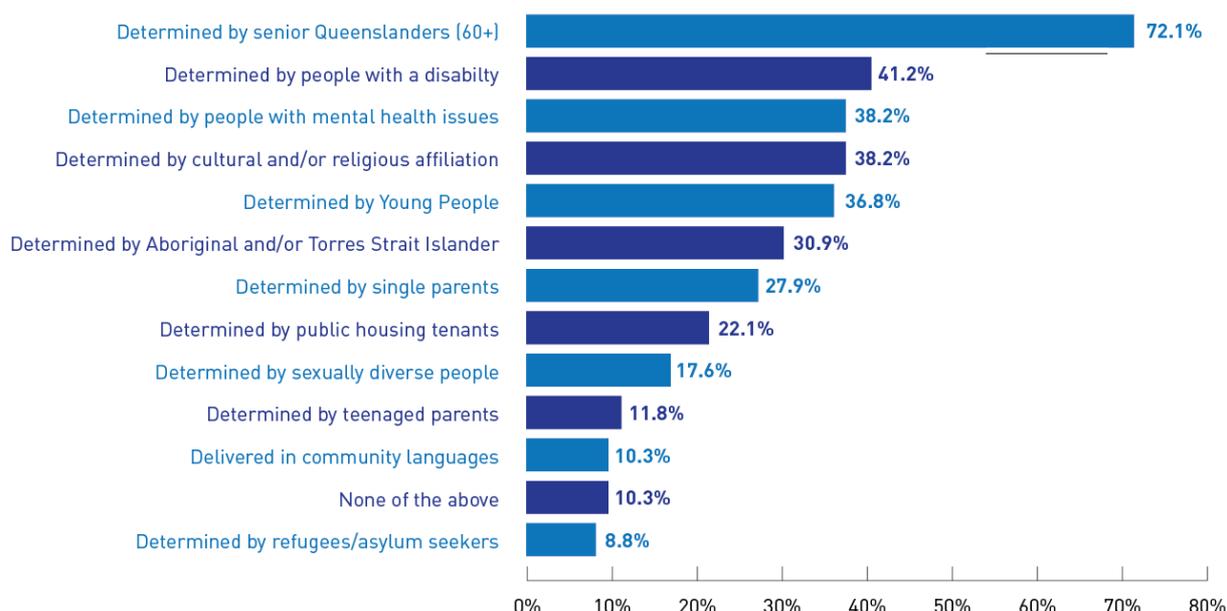


Table A. Co-designed Neighbourhood Centre services by demographic

It has been noted in Victorian research<sup>41</sup> that a number of these demographic groups experience increased social benefits from involvement in Neighbourhood Centres, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, Men (45-64), People with a disability, Public Housing Tenants and those with English as a Second Language. These vulnerable demographic groups containing socially isolated individuals greatly benefit from Neighbourhood Centre activities in Queensland, not only with social connection but a wide range of support needs.

QFCA’s participatory research with Queensland’s Neighbourhood Centres in the Monsoon region identified that those with social limitations were also particularly vulnerable during natural disasters<sup>42</sup>. These limitations included community members with communication barriers, limited support networks, low social engagement and low socio-economic backgrounds. These findings reveal a significant correlation between social connection and disaster resilience. Because of their strong relationship with local communities, Neighbourhood Centres are aware of socially isolated individuals that need to be immediately followed up on when local disasters occur. The QFCA’s research<sup>43</sup> identified that while many Local Disaster Management Groups have established Vulnerable People Registers, these registers should be expanded to include people experiencing

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.qfca.org.au/survey-results>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.nhvic.org.au/faqs/loneliness-social-isolation-and-neighbourhood-houses>

<sup>42</sup> [https://e947a178-42a7-4d9d-b5dc-097a78a61699.filesusr.com/ugd/0cc9dc\\_9c6d5e9c7e234f01950c0dfbafb99215.pdf](https://e947a178-42a7-4d9d-b5dc-097a78a61699.filesusr.com/ugd/0cc9dc_9c6d5e9c7e234f01950c0dfbafb99215.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> [https://e947a178-42a7-4d9d-b5dc-097a78a61699.filesusr.com/ugd/0cc9dc\\_9c6d5e9c7e234f01950c0dfbafb99215.pdf](https://e947a178-42a7-4d9d-b5dc-097a78a61699.filesusr.com/ugd/0cc9dc_9c6d5e9c7e234f01950c0dfbafb99215.pdf)

considerable social isolation – such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, CALD Communities, people experiencing homelessness, the aged and those experiencing domestic violence. This research highlights the important role that Neighbourhood Centres play in supporting socially isolated individuals during natural disasters.

The Community Development approach to local needs by Neighbourhood Centres ensures that local people, especially those from vulnerable groups, are actively participating in change that is driven by and relevant for their individual needs. A comprehensive list of Queensland Neighbourhood Centre social connection activities to target demographics is included in **Appendix A**.

## 9. Neighbourhood Centres – The Key Strategy (TOR 6)

Neighbourhood Centres by their very nature are all about social connection and participation. The QFCA recommends that any strategy proposed by the Queensland Government to address issues of loneliness and social isolation in communities, places Neighbourhood Centres at the centre and promotes NCCs as the central solution moving forward. This is reinforced by recommendations from Swinburne University Research (Karg et. al. 2021<sup>44</sup>) which emphasises the need to highlight existing opportunities to leverage local social infrastructure to increase social connection. Neighbourhood and Community Centres are the core social infrastructure that need to be leveraged for social and community participation, just as hospitals are core social infrastructure for health and schools are core social infrastructure for education.

Ending Loneliness Together<sup>45</sup> proposes a National Response Plan for targeting loneliness. Of particular note are recommendations 5 and 6 which highlight the importance of hearing the voices of diverse people groups and empowering communities using grassroots methodology. As previously outlined, Neighbourhood Centres use grass roots community development approaches to address issues of importance to localities. Neighbourhood Centres are ideally placed to listen to the voices of diverse people experiencing loneliness and social isolation and implement strategies using place-based community-led approaches. Because of their local networks and catch-all nature, Neighbourhood Centres can be promoted as key organisations in community awareness campaigns, can equip other service providers with specialised skills and knowledge, contribute to research and inform the development of a national community database to target loneliness in communities<sup>46</sup>.

In order for Neighbourhood Centres to be recognised as the key pieces of social infrastructure as they are, QFCA recommends the following:

### 9.1 Recommendation 1: Increase Neighbourhood Centre Investment

Neighbourhood Centres are the most underfunded community service in Queensland, yet they give the most to their communities. The potential of Neighbourhood Centres to deepen their contribution to improving Queenslanders' mental health is extraordinary, however they need adequate funding. With an average Queensland Government funding amount of \$134,000 for each centre<sup>47</sup>, some Neighbourhood Centres struggle to employ one worker plus overheads and program costs. The current ratio of one funded worker to 262 community visitors is unsustainable, especially when this worker is responsible for centre operations, policy, community development, volunteer

<sup>44</sup> <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2021-07/apo-nid309682.pdf>

<sup>45</sup> <https://endingloneliness.com.au/news-events/ending-loneliness-together-in-australia-white-paper/>

<sup>46</sup> <https://endingloneliness.com.au/news-events/ending-loneliness-together-in-australia-white-paper/>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.qfca.org.au/survey-results>

management, partnership management, IT, programs and communications. A base level of funding to cover at least 2.5 staff members, plus costs to cover overheads means that Neighbourhood Centres have the minimum foundation required to respond to the loneliness epidemic across the state.

During QFCA surveying in 2020<sup>48</sup>, Neighbourhood Centres also stated that if they were to receive additional funding, further social connection activities would be offered by their organisation. 75% of Neighbourhood Centres stated they would offer more groups and activities that increase community connection, while an even greater number (85.9%) stated they would run general health and wellbeing promotion and activities – greatly increasing quality of life outcomes for even more community members experiencing illness related loneliness and social isolation. Additional activities offered by Neighbourhood Centres according to their additional funding aspirations are listed here:

% of NCC's	Additional Funding Aspiration
85.9%	<b>Health and wellbeing promotion and activities</b>
75%	<b>Social connection activities e.g. art, craft, community music/theatre, community lunches /social eating groups</b>
59.3%	Computer/Digital Literacy Training
56.2%	Pre/Non accredited training e.g. work, further study, life skills etc
50%	Literacy and Numeracy training
48.4%	Personal Interest classes (languages other than English, Thai cooking etc)
46.8%	Childcare/playgroups/homework clubs/holiday programs
35.9%	English as an additional language classes
31.2%	Accredited vocational education & training
18.7%	Alternative to school programs

The provision of these additional programs, through additional funding, will exponentially lead to an increase in social connection value according to activity type as identified in the research by Neighbourhood Houses Victoria. For example, if 125 NCCs had increased capacity to facilitate community connection and contribution activities each week, with 5 extra activities in each centre and an average size of 20 participants, that's 12,500 more Queenslanders experiencing increased social connection each week. This will lead to a clear reduction in loneliness in local populations across Queensland. Furthermore, increased community participation decreases demand for health and other social services.

In addition, it must also be noted that there are many Neighbourhood and Community Centres (that are QFCA members) operating around the state with no Neighbourhood Centre funding from the Queensland Government. These community-based organisations rely on local resources, a volunteer workforce and small grants to operate, yet their potential for targeting loneliness and social isolation with Neighbourhood Centre funding is considerable. Core funding can only enhance the work of these centres.

## 9.2 Recommendation 2: Strength Based Awareness Campaign emphasising the key role of NCC's.

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.qfca.org.au/survey-results>

During National Neighbourhood Centre Week in 2021, over 1000 Neighbourhood Houses and Centres across Australia celebrated the theme “Loneliness: The Answer Is Community”<sup>49</sup>. Due to their welcoming and diverse nature, Neighbourhood and Community Centres are ideally placed to be an “answer” to loneliness and social isolation in local communities. This campaign highlighted that the inherent place-based local community focused nature of Neighbourhood Centres is the perfect response to the national loneliness epidemic.

As part of an overall national strategy to address loneliness, Ending Loneliness Together<sup>50</sup> recommend a community awareness campaign concentrating on the impact of loneliness, nuanced to various vulnerable demographics in conjunction with end-users and stakeholders. This community awareness strategy could be achieved at a state level through the promotion of local Neighbourhood Centres.

While 1.83 million Queenslanders visit Neighbourhood Centres each year, many Neighbourhood Centres and Stakeholders indicate that members of the public are not aware of what Neighbourhood Centres currently offer local communities

Rather than addressing loneliness and social isolation issues in a stigmatising manner, a Strength Based approach could be implemented highlighting the social connection, sense of belonging, welcoming and inclusiveness that Neighbourhood Centres create in local communities. The promotion of Neighbourhood Centres in media, TV & billboard advertising and social media campaigns can be linked with local Neighbourhood Centre events, community projects and activities which concentrate on combating social isolation in Queensland Communities.

Digital technology to facilitate social prescribing could also be utilised throughout the campaign to link vulnerable community members to local Neighbourhood Centres. Once receiving an online referral through a website or mobile app, Neighbourhood Centres could link isolated individuals to social and community groups in their area using their vast local knowledge and community networks. Referrals could be made to community gardens, volunteer opportunities, faith communities, environmental groups and other general interest groups.

Additional resourcing for Neighbourhood Centres is required to respond to increased clientele as the result of any community awareness campaigns.

### 9.3 Recommendation 3: Enhance Neighbourhood Centre Digital and Physical Infrastructure.

Sector research by the QFCA identified a wide variety of physical infrastructure types for Neighbourhood Centres, ranging from purpose-built facilities by the Department of Communities to shop fronts and old converted houses<sup>51</sup> (Table B)

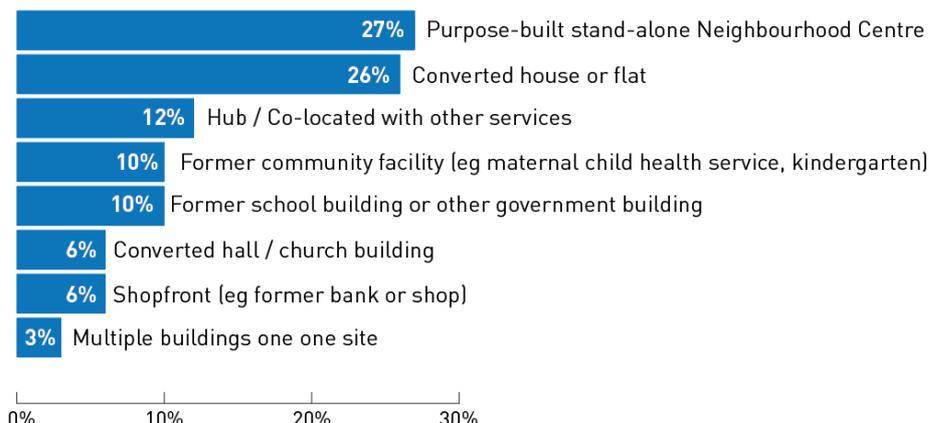
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<sup>49</sup> <https://www.neighbourhoodhouseweek.com/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://endingloneliness.com.au/news-events/ending-loneliness-together-in-australia-white-paper/>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.qfca.org.au/survey-results>

**Table B: Queensland Neighbourhood Centre Main Building Type**



Neighbourhood Centres not only differ by type, but also in quality. Purpose built Neighbourhood Centres constructed by the Queensland Government have received cash injections of several million dollars whilst other privately owned building types are up to 100 years old. Furthermore, Neighbourhood Centres located in Government owned infrastructure have access to peppercorn leasing rates while other Neighbourhood Centres pay private rental amounts creating disparity in operational costs between organisations.

While historically Neighbourhood Centres have operated from disused housing in central locations to foster a sense of welcoming, homeliness and belonging, we have outlined the research by Karg et. al. (2021<sup>52</sup>) which also identifies the five types of social infrastructure that are pro-connection and pro-integration in local communities.

Many Neighbourhood Centres need immediate physical upgrades, while many localities would greatly benefit from a newly-funded Neighbourhood Centre where none currently exists. Careful consideration needs to be made to ensure Neighbourhood Centre facilities remain non-clinical in nature, fostering a sense of welcoming, homeliness and grassroots participation. Additionally, planning needs to be undertaken for new Neighbourhood Centres in new development areas, to ensure community connection is built into the fabric of new neighbourhoods.

Investment in new builds and centre upgrades to Neighbourhood Centre infrastructure should ideally incorporate all of the elements outlined by Karg et. al. (2021<sup>53</sup>) to reflect the core business of Neighbourhood Centre work - building connection and belonging in communities. In particular, investment into Neighbourhood Centre infrastructure should focus on:

- a) **Increasing Third Spaces:** Whether co-located on Neighbourhood Centre sites or located nearby, the increase of community gardens, toy libraries, social enterprise cafes and similar initiatives creates increased opportunities for social interaction in both formal and informal capacities.
- b) **Developing Bumping Places:** Neighbourhood Centre work in social connection is not limited to Neighbourhood Centre sites. Neighbourhood Centres can input into other local infrastructure to build community connection in parks, outdoor art and sculpture spaces.

<sup>52</sup> <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2021-07/apo-nid309682.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2021-07/apo-nid309682.pdf>

- c) **Hosting Ephemeral Places:** Neighbourhood Centres need areas suitable to run family fun days, expos, shows, markets and carnivals to foster common social identity and shared community life.
- d) **Spaces for Community Groups** – This is the bread and butter of Neighbourhood Centre work and creates enormous opportunities for social connection. All Neighbourhood Centres need adequate spaces for community groups onsite to encourage community participation.
- e) **Enhancing Online and Hybrid Spaces** – With extra resourcing, Neighbourhood Centres can be the epicentre of digital community connection, acting as a bridge between online and in-person encounters.

Many Neighbourhood Centres have already demonstrated this capability during recent COVID19 restrictions, however, many struggle with a significant lack of digital infrastructure and IT support. If resourced accordingly, Neighbourhood Centres have the potential to greatly increase their assistance to demographics with low digital literacy, reducing social isolation in these vulnerable groups while creating in-person opportunities for social connection. The Queensland Government's positioning of the Digital Economy with Communities presents considerable opportunities for Neighbourhood Centres to enhance online community development opportunities. As previously mentioned, additional digital connectivity with Neighbourhood Centres as hubs of local communities can result in increased social prescribing opportunities, reducing demand and economic strain on local health and other services.

#### 9.4 Recommendation 4: Resource QFCA to deliver additional sector support including NCC Reporting Framework.

As noted in the DCHDE briefing paper for the present inquiry, the Queensland Government funds a number of community service peak organisations to support social participation and enhance sector capability. QFCA is currently the lowest funded peak organisation by DCHDE yet works with community organisations with the highest amount of community engagement.

As previously outlined, QFCA has designed a reporting and performance framework in partnership with the Queensland Government and Neighbourhood Centres along with a 3-year implementation plan. This framework contains measurement tools which calculate increased social connection and social capital value in community members involved in Neighbourhood Centre activities. QFCA is poised to implement this framework, which will measure the impact of NCCs on loneliness and social isolation. The only barrier is the funding to implement this framework, which has been codeveloped with the sector and key industry partners.

In addition to the reporting framework, QFCA supports the entire Neighbourhood Centre sector across the state. With further resourcing, QFCA can better support Neighbourhood Centres in their core business of social connection through online resource sharing initiatives, e-learning and other professional development platforms, HR and policy support, research, disaster strategy, social prescribing and community development initiatives. In particular, QFCA's new digital infrastructure – to be officially launched in later 2021 - can be used to support new digital connection, communications and data aggregation initiatives through Queensland's Neighbourhood Centres with additional IT resources.

With additional resourcing, QFCA will enhance social connection and participation work around the state, and share resources with the wider human services sector, workplaces and government, developed with the expertise of Queensland's Neighbourhood Centres which have been at the forefront of this work for over 40 years. The QFCA's partnerships with Griffith University,

Community Development Queensland and the Coalition of Community Boards, along with strategic partnerships with peak bodies across the state, ideally situates the organisation to enhance place based responses to loneliness and social isolation across the state.

## Conclusion

By their very nature, Neighbourhood Centres are place-based social infrastructure that is participatory, integrative and welcoming. Their community development approach ensures that social connection and belonging programs are co-designed with the community itself, especially demographic groups who are vulnerable and disadvantaged. Their effectiveness is demonstrated with a clear evidence base and supported by both quantitative and qualitative research.

This submission has highlighted that place-based Neighbourhood Centres have specialised local knowledge of loneliness and social isolation in their immediate communities, each having a unique insight into the expressions and causes of these issues. Their insights are as diverse as the communities in which they are located. These unique insights mean they are able to respond to and adapt their programs to ensure that social connection continues throughout COVID 19 restrictions so that communities face only physical distancing and not social distancing.

Because Neighbourhood Centres are uniquely positioned as the heart of community connection and belonging, they are the most ideal social infrastructure to be leveraged by the Queensland Government to target the loneliness and social isolation epidemic throughout the state.

### **Every dollar of investment into Neighbourhood Centres is an investment into social connection.**

In order to leverage Neighbourhood Centres in further strategies, QFCA recommend;

- an urgent, increased investment into Neighbourhood Centre Funding;
- placing Neighbourhood Centres at the centre of a strengths-based awareness campaign for community connection and contribution as the antidote to loneliness and social isolation;
- supporting the improvement of physical and digital NCC infrastructure; and,
- increasing funding to the Neighbourhood Centre peak body, the QFCA, to undertake further sector development and sharing sector expertise through training, reporting mechanisms, communications and resource sharing.

### **Authors:**

Chris Mundy (Sector Development Officer, QFCA) and Em James (General Manager, QFCA)  
in collaboration with Queensland Neighbourhood Centres

Queensland Families and Communities Association

Mob: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

## Appendix A: Percentage of Neighbourhood Houses providing programs, organised by target groups

SOURCE: NCC Sector Survey, <https://www.qfca.org.au/survey-results>

Program Type	General public	Children (under 13)	Young people (13-25)	Unemployed people	CALD people	Refugees and asylum seekers	Seniors (60+)	Aboriginals and/or Torres Strait Islanders	Men aged 45-64	LGBTQI communities	People with disability	People with mental health issues	Single parents	Public housing tenants	People on low incomes	Homeless People	Other
Accredited vocational education & training	17%	0%	6%	17%	11%	5%	3%	8%	8%	3%	3%	3%	6%	5%	11%	3%	0%
Alternative to School programs	3%	6%	6%	0%	0%	0%	0%	5%	0%	0%	3%	2%	3%	0%	3%	0%	0%
Computer training / digital literacy	49%	3%	6%	18%	11%	3%	48%	12%	9%	2%	9%	8%	5%	9%	17%	5%	0%
English as an additional language (EAL) training / English conversation	12%	0%	0%	3%	26%	15%	2%	0%	2%	0%	0%	2%	2%	2%	3%	0%	0%
Personal interest eg languages other than English, Thai cooking etc	43%	8%	9%	6%	6%	3%	25%	9%	8%	3%	17%	12%	14%	8%	17%	5%	2%
Literacy & numeracy training	14%	0%	0%	2%	6%	3%	3%	3%	2%	0%	3%	3%	2%	2%	5%	0%	0%
Pre /Non accredited training eg work, further study, life skills	34%	3%	9%	11%	8%	3%	5%	6%	3%	2%	5%	6%	3%	5%	12%	3%	2%
Social connection activities eg art , craft, community choirs/music/theatre, community lunches / social eating groups	85%	23%	17%	25%	26%	12%	55%	26%	25%	11%	35%	29%	18%	14%	32%	14%	2%
Community Events/Festivals/Markets	97%	31%	26%	23%	26%	17%	34%	29%	23%	17%	28%	26%	29%	18%	31%	17%	2%
Food security/garden groups	49%	8%	6%	11%	12%	8%	11%	9%	6%	5%	14%	14%	9%	9%	15%	11%	0%
Health and wellbeing promotion and activities (eg walking, yoga, exercise, meditation, healthy eating/cooking etc)	72%	11%	11%	17%	18%	9%	38%	15%	17%	8%	14%	20%	15%	11%	26%	8%	0%
Indigenous or CALD cultural activities	37%	14%	14%	9%	25%	8%	12%	22%	9%	5%	9%	9%	8%	5%	8%	5%	0%
Self help groups	42%	5%	9%	12%	5%	5%	12%	8%	12%	8%	12%	20%	9%	6%	11%	6%	3%
Drug and Alcohol programs	25%	0%	5%	3%	2%	2%	5%	5%	2%	2%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	0%
Childcare/kinder	9%	9%	0%	2%	3%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	2%	8%	2%	6%	0%	0%
Early childhood development programs (e.g. early literacy, language development)	18%	15%	2%	3%	8%	3%	2%	5%	2%	0%	5%	5%	15%	3%	9%	0%	3%
Homework clubs	5%	14%	9%	2%	3%	3%	0%	3%	0%	2%	0%	2%	2%	2%	2%	0%	0%
Outside School Hours Care / holiday programs	5%	18%	14%	0%	5%	2%	0%	5%	0%	0%	2%	2%	2%	0%	5%	0%	0%
Play Groups	43%	25%	3%	6%	14%	8%	5%	11%	2%	2%	5%	5%	12%	5%	15%	0%	6%
Community Newspaper / magazine / newsletter	63%	2%	5%	6%	8%	2%	11%	6%	6%	5%	6%	6%	5%	6%	8%	5%	2%
Community Safety	28%	2%	6%	6%	9%	3%	9%	6%	5%	3%	5%	5%	5%	5%	8%	3%	0%
Community Transport (trips and outings)	12%	3%	3%	5%	6%	3%	25%	5%	3%	2%	8%	3%	8%	6%	8%	6%	0%
Disaster/emergency preparedness/recovery	52%	5%	6%	6%	11%	9%	11%	8%	6%	5%	6%	6%	6%	8%	9%	5%	2%
Environmental sustainability projects / groups	28%	5%	5%	5%	5%	3%	6%	6%	5%	2%	5%	5%	3%	3%	6%	2%	0%
Family Support Programs	42%	12%	12%	11%	8%	5%	5%	14%	5%	6%	12%	12%	15%	12%	17%	8%	2%
Volunteer training	46%	0%	3%	15%	9%	5%	12%	6%	6%	3%	8%	9%	3%	3%	6%	0%	2%