



**MULTICULTURAL
AUSTRALIA**

it's who we are

Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland

18 August 2021

Committee Secretary
Community Support and Services Committee
Brisbane QLD 4000
Electronic submission

Re: Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland

Multicultural Australia is pleased to provide this submission to the Community Support and Services Committee.

We welcome the Queensland Government's intent to identify the nature and impact of social isolation and loneliness, and the role, scope, and priorities of a state-wide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness.

Multicultural Australia exists to create a welcoming and inclusive community for all. As Queensland's Settlement Service Provider for migrants and refugees, we have been welcoming refugees, people seeking asylum, international students and other new arrivals for over 20 years. We strive to create a fairer, more prosperous society for all Queenslanders. We work closely with diverse multicultural communities in Queensland from new and emerging communities, to the more established communities.

Multicultural Australia supports our clients and communities to overcome marginalisation and isolation within their own cultural and faith communities, and within the wider Australian public. We provide a range of programs and events, often in partnership with key services and sectors, to promote inclusion, connection and belonging for all with a focus on the engagement of new arrivals, supporting them to access information, supports, and develop peer networks; subsequently overcoming marginalisation and isolation.

Multicultural Australia is a foundational member of the Queensland Community Alliance, and we recognise that this Inquiry is initiated in response to the grass-roots process of community listening and organising through the Alliance. We commend the Queensland Government in honouring the commitment provided to the Alliance around developing a state-wide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness, starting with a Parliamentary Inquiry.

Our submission seeks to highlight issues affecting people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (including refugees, migrants, people seeking asylum, and temporary visa holders)

that can cause loneliness; and the barriers they may face in getting help to address these. Our recommendation is for the consideration of a comprehensive strategy to address social isolation and loneliness in Queensland. Any such strategy must be informed by the voices and experiences of communities across Queensland (including around raising awareness of the risks of loneliness, as well as, in the design of specific interventions to tackle loneliness and isolation). We recommend additional research around developing evidence-based measures of loneliness that can easily translate across languages and cultures. Any such strategy should consider adequate resourcing and support at the local level for frontline resources and community spaces to mobilise action and support from within the community.

Multicultural Australia will continue to engage in this significant work and would be happy to assist with any further information concerning this submission. For any further communication, please contact Rose Dash, Chief Client Officer, Multicultural Australia RoseD@multiculturalaustralia.org.au or, 0448 085 531.

Yours sincerely

Christine Castley
CEO
Multicultural Australia

Introduction

There is a growing awareness of the impact of social isolation and loneliness with interest across government, research, and the community sector to better understand and address the issue.

Multicultural Australia's submission to this Inquiry is premised around an understanding of loneliness as:

Subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want¹.

Social isolation is a lack of social connections. The subjective feeling of loneliness is distinguishable from social isolation. Social isolation can lead to loneliness in some people – yet others can feel lonely without being socially isolated. Research links both loneliness and social isolation to higher risks for a range of physical and mental conditions. People who find themselves alone due to life circumstances (loss or separation from family, loss of mobility or displacement, transportation, etc.) can find themselves at particular risk. Conversely, people who engage in meaningful activities with others find more positive outcomes like improved mood, sense of purpose, etc.²

There is an understanding in research that there are specific contexts and circumstances in which individuals have heightened risks for experiencing loneliness and isolation. A range of circumstances are identified around this – including, living with disability, mental health, chronic illness, being elderly, and/or having a migrant or refugee background³.

Our submission would like to highlight issues of loneliness social isolation in relation to culturally and linguistically diverse communities – including, refugees and immigrants⁴. People in this

¹ UK Government Strategy. Macdonald, M, Kulakiewicz, A *et al* (June 2021). *Tackling Loneliness*. Commons Library Research briefing. See [CBP-8514.pdf \(parliament.uk\)](#)

² See [Social isolation, loneliness in older people pose health risks | National Institute on Aging \(nih.gov\)](#)

³ Warr, D., Cox, J., & Redshaw, S. (2020). A review of associations between social isolation, loneliness and poor mental health among five population groups. See [A review of associations between social isolation, loneliness and poor mental health among five population groups — Charles Sturt University Research Output \(csu.edu.au\)](#)

⁴ 'Refugee and immigrant' identities encompass a broad range - including forced and voluntary migrants. These include - refugees/humanitarian entrants/people seeking asylum; temporary migrants (including international students or people on short term work visas), and independent and dependant migrants (in skilled or family migration categories). These also encompass cultural and linguistic diversity. The Increasing diversity of Queensland (with 21.6% of the resident population born overseas- 2016 Census) requires an appropriate consideration and reflection in our policy considerations and development of state-wide strategies.

cohort are more at risk of experiencing certain factors that cause loneliness, like feelings of not belonging, and discrimination.

Our response to the Inquiry Terms of Reference is provided below:

Terms of Reference 1: *the nature and extent of the impact of social isolation and loneliness in Queensland, including but not limited to:*

- *identification of and consultation with vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals or groups at significant risk across the life course*
 - *the interplay of COVID-19 with this issue*
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As Queensland's Settlement Service Provider for refugees and migrants, Multicultural Australia is the first point of engagement for many new Queenslanders. We work with refugees, people seeking asylum, international students and migrants at different life stages; supporting their development of independence, wellbeing, and belonging in the community.

Refugee resettlement is complex – at Multicultural Australia, we work to a comprehensive settlement and integration framework that works across multiple domains. Our work is also informed by a deep engagement with clients and culturally and linguistically diverse communities to provide an insight into what is important in settlement, from those with lived experience.

Our engagement with clients and communities highlights that they seek a 'sense of belonging' in their local community⁵. A striking and consistent feature of our engagement with clients and communities is the reiteration of the importance of social connections, including, connections with the broader Australian community. In our experience, social connection is likely to be prioritized above other factors, in some instances even employment⁶.

In Multicultural Australia's practice framework, **Belonging** is understood as including community connections, understanding Australian culture and civil society, but also extending beyond this to a sense of individual connectedness and happiness. It is about how individuals obtain social

⁵ A recent consultation with Multicultural Australia Client Voice Reference Group (an advisory group to Multicultural Australia) identified 'sense of belonging' as an important consideration in assessing settlement success under the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP). This was identified as a required addition to the current settlement outcomes identified under the Program. This is a significant recognition – program and policymakers' expectations of settlement emphasize systemic and quantifiable factors in assessing settlement success; while refugees and communities themselves discuss settlement in terms of personal happiness and community connectedness.

⁶ *The Living in Queensland Sensemaker Project (2016)* - internal Multicultural Australia research. Surveys with 315 clients using the Sensemaker® narrative research methodology to better understand their experiences of living in Queensland.

capital – relationships characterised by *trust* and *reciprocity* in intensive and extensive social networks⁷.

Social connections for refugees and immigrants include multiple domains – social bonds, bridges and links⁸. Social bonds include connections with others with a shared sense of identity – for refugees and immigrants, this includes families (variously defined), ethnic and cultural groups and associations. Social bridges are connections with people of a different background – and can include connections in various settings like local schools, places of learning, community groups, employment, sporting events, etc. Social links include connections with institutions, including settlement, community, and government services.

At Multicultural Australia, we undertake activities in **early settlement** (such as finding appropriate accommodation, securing income support, and access to medical services) that provide a foundation for the settlement journey of refugees in Australia. We assist with **enabling engagement and independence** – through supporting links with English language acquisition, and participation in education and employment. We strive to **enhance a sense of belonging** in our clients and communities through supporting community connections, and building an understanding of Australian culture and civil society. We also **promote wellbeing** within our clients and communities – providing support through the complex process of establishing meaningful identities and aspirations in the Australian context. This support is provided with the acknowledgment of individual and collective experiences of loss and trauma in the refugee experience; and its impacts to settlement.

Social connections for refugees and immigrants can be impacted across different domains:

- **Social bonds:** individuals and families may harbour concerns for the safety of family members or friends overseas in refugee/conflict situations; or from the impacts flowing from family separation;

⁷ This practice framework accords with our recent client and community consultations. Multicultural Australia is in the process of developing performance measures to measure client wellbeing across all our programs and activities. Through a range of consultation processes with our client advisory groups (Client Voice Reference Group (see n.5), youth advisory groups, program-specific groups in regional QLD], we have identified three common measures across all our program areas. These include – measuring a **sense of interconnection**; a **sense of self-reliance**; as well as measuring a **sense of belonging**. Our client voice informs us that a sense of belonging is when one feels accepted and included in the community and society. It is also about being able to participate actively in society. A sense of interconnection indicates a feeling of connection to community that could include a local area (place), a community of identity and/or the natural environment. Interconnection is about reciprocity and a two way relationship. A sense of self-reliance is the feeling associated with confidence, empowerment, skills, knowledge and connections to make decisions, to choose relationships and goals - and work towards these.

⁸ UK Home Office (2019). Indicators of Integration Framework. London, UK Home Office. See [HO Indicators of Integration Framework \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

- **Social bridges:** there is a lack of a rigorous and dedicated approaches to building resources to bridge ethnic differences and enable refugees and immigrants to build deeper connections with the Australian community;
- **Social links:** people's interactions with services and institutions may be unwelcoming or even discriminatory (or perceived to be so). Where systems fail to respond well to diverse communities, including refugees, migrants, and temporary visa holders (i.e., people seeking asylum, international students) – people can often feel frustrated and unwelcome, and fail to access the services they need, or develop a sense of belonging.

The above impacts can lead to people feeling lonely or not having the opportunity to form appropriate links or connections in community.

A range of other barriers also significant to the refugee and immigrant experience, which impact on their participation in community life:

- Limited financial resources in early settlement;
- Limited English fluency;
- Challenges in engagement in education - particularly for those with limited literacy and/or prior experience of schooling;
- Barriers around employment in, 1) gaining recognition for prior learning, 2) obtaining experience in the Australian job market, 3) navigating this same market, and 4) workplace socialisation;
- Varying levels of competency with the systems and markets that govern service provision in Australia.

Moreover, there are varying impacts across **gender, disability, health issues** and **life course stages** (e.g., late adolescent/early adulthood and among older people).

Our practice experience has found that people from refugee and immigrant backgrounds face greater barriers to accessing help to join community activities, making social connections, and creating a sense of belonging.

Impacts of COVID 19 pandemic

The pandemic unleashed widespread concerns for its impacts on people's livelihoods, their physical and mental health, and wellbeing. These concerns being informed by an understanding that limitations to social connection and interactions, is critical to health.

As COVID-19 impacted Queensland from early 2020, many of our clients and communities

began to express concerns about social isolation and community connectedness as government restrictions and lockdowns progressed.

Some community groups were hit particularly hard during the pandemic – such as, Temporary Visa holders (including people seeking asylum and International Students) - given their ineligibility for relief packages implemented as part of the Commonwealth Government's pandemic response, such as *JobKeeper*.

Multicultural Australia was significantly concerned for recent arrivals to Queensland and individuals experiencing loneliness and social isolation prior to the emergence of COVID-19 – with the pandemic making them particularly vulnerable to experiencing short or longer-term mental health problems associated with lockdown conditions. Further, our concerns stemmed from an abrupt halt in direct face to face service provision by most services – rendering many individuals with no contact or links in the community.

Further, a majority of community events were disrupted or cancelled due to public health restrictions; affecting our clients and communities ability to form social bonds and bridges, as well as, many of the planned events objectives to promote inclusion, culture, wellbeing, and connection.

Terms of Reference 2: *the causes and drivers of social isolation and loneliness, including those unique to Queensland*

In addition to a range of barriers identified in the previous section, the following issues are important to consider:

- **Racism and discrimination:** people from minority religious and ethnic communities experience racism, vilification, or hate speech within Queensland communities and in our shared public spaces. Further, there are significant barriers for people to be able to report or seek appropriate recourse for such crimes. This has significant impacts on people's wellbeing, feelings of belonging, and on their ability to participate in society. Multicultural Australia recently led a public campaign⁹ in response to the Queensland Government's inquiry into serious vilification and hate crimes in Queensland. This

⁹ Multicultural Australia submission to the Inquiry into Serious Vilification and Hate Crimes in Queensland (July 2021)

campaign was aimed to support members of Queensland's diverse communities to safely share their experiences of hate crimes and vilification in Queensland. We are seeking stronger legislative protection and effective systemic responses for Queenslanders to be able to live safely, and for our diverse communities to have trust in our systems and feel confident to report instances of crime.

- **Stigma:** these can be associated with disability and/or mental illness, and can limit social engagement, leading to exclusion. The Australian disability and health care system can be complex and confusing for many – and there are variant obstacles to understanding services and unfamiliarity with negotiating entitlement and price for disability supports. Multicultural Australia practice experience demonstrates the almost 'double disadvantage' and exclusion of people with disability from refugee, migrant and temporary visa holder backgrounds¹⁰. Here it is also important to understand the stigma that might be associated with loneliness itself¹¹.
- **Digital exclusion:** some sociodemographic groups in Queensland are more digitally excluded – including, people in low-income households, people aged 65+, people who did not complete secondary school, people with a disability and people not in the labour force. Queensland's digital inclusion score ranks fifth out of Australia's eight states and territories¹². Digital inclusion for scores of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) cohorts is varied with differing outcomes for distinct groups within the CALD cohort. Research in Shepparton VIC, with recently-arrived CALD migrants under the humanitarian program revealed a pattern of lower digital inclusion than the national average, largely as a result of very low levels of affordability¹³. The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the importance of digital inclusion. In Multicultural Australia's experience, the move to online service delivery through the Pandemic was particularly hard for clients and community members lacking digital resources and/or the ability to negotiate this mode of service provision.

¹⁰ Multicultural Australia submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of people with disability (June 2021). This submission was informed by consultations with experienced Multicultural Australia staff and Case Managers - bringing attention to bring attention to issues impacting inclusion for people with disability who are from refugee/immigrant backgrounds in Queensland.

¹¹ A British Red Cross exploration of loneliness among people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Backgrounds found many respondents admitting they did not feel confident talking about loneliness or even admit to feeling lonely. See [Barriers to belonging | British Red Cross](#)

¹² The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) provides a comprehensive picture of Australia's online participation - measuring three key dimensions of digital inclusion: Access, Affordability, and Digital Ability. See - Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Holcombe-James, I, Kennedy, J, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, 2020, *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020*, RMIT and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra. [*TLS ADII Report-2020 WebU.pdf \(digitalinclusionindex.org.au\)](#)

¹³ *Ibid.*

Terms of Reference 3: *the protective factors known to mitigate social isolation and loneliness*

Multicultural Australia supports our clients and communities to overcome marginalisation and isolation within their community, and the wider Australian public. Through a range of programs, often in partnership with key services, corporate sector and government, we promote the engagement of new arrivals, supporting them to develop peer networks and information supports; subsequently overcoming marginalisation and isolation. With several of these initiatives there is a reciprocal relationship with members of the broader community - through volunteering, cultural capability training, social media and community events. The overall aim is to build social bonds and bridges to improve sentiments towards diversity, and promote inclusion and belonging.

In our experience, factors to reduce social isolation and loneliness include:

- Meaningful community participation;
- Increasing employment opportunities; and
- Anti-discrimination/racism and stigma interventions.

Some examples of our programs and interventions on these factors include:

Meaningful Community Participation:

Multicultural Australia has individual and group programs to create opportunities for participation in inclusive activities, events, sports, etc. Some of our key initiatives include:

- Early settlement Lifeskills and Orientation program for refugee arrivals to Queensland;
- Referrals, linkages, and capacity building with key government and community services for clients across diverse stages of settlement in Australia;
- Creating deliberate and purposeful connections for new arrivals – with communities of interest (spiritual, ethnic, community), and with places of interest (community centres, sporting clubs, libraries, etc.)
- Supporting community networks and associations – such as Community Leaders' Gatherings (i.e., regular community forums led by community members from new and emerging communities in the Greater Brisbane region).
- Programs supporting specific target cohorts – for example, youth support projects through the Migrant Youth Vision Project and Youth Hub Pilot program (across sites in

Inala, Redbank Plains, and Toowoomba); and Queensland Student Hub supporting international students in partnership with Trade and Investment Queensland.

- Creating dedicated opportunities for connections with the wider community – for example, through our *Connecting through Sport Program* that provides pathways into sport and physical activity for refugees and immigrants¹⁴.
- Establishment, investment, and management of the Redbank Plains Community Centre, developed as an initiative from Ipswich City Council and Queensland Government. The Centre has a vision of creating a welcoming, safe, and inclusive space for the community; maintaining a diverse volunteer pool (e.g., ethnicity, age, gender, faith, ability, etc.); and engaging and responding to the growing and diverse region to address psychosocial barriers for residents through frontline individual and group responses, address service access issues, and positively impact diverse local communities¹⁵.
- Welcome Hubs across Brisbane in partnership with local community centres – supporting community conversations and cultural connection events¹⁶.
- Delivering signature Community Events such as, *Luminous Lantern Parade*¹⁷ and *Mosaic Multicultural Festival*¹⁸. In 2020, with concerns of Multicultural Australia's signature Community events being cancelled due to the pandemic, we transformed our

¹⁴ This program builds on our partnerships with Brisbane Lions and AFL Queensland, expanding into multi-sports including, AFL, Football, Netball and Tennis and engaging over 20 sports clubs across South East Queensland. The program will deliver a suite of sports inclusion programs for refugees and migrants, to increase their sense of belonging, as well as to work with sports clubs to champion diversity and inclusion.

¹⁵ A longitudinal Social Impact Assessment of the Redbank Plains Community Centre has found notable findings over the years – including, improved sentiments around social cohesion, sense of welcome and cross-cultural connections for people engaging with the Centre. The Centre has welcomed over 15,000 visitors since 2018 with over 50% born overseas. In addition, the Centre maintains a diverse group of volunteers to ensure the faces of the community are represented, and visitors feel a sense of belonging and welcome.

¹⁶ Multicultural Australia recognises the importance of Community Neighbourhood Centres and considers them as key to addressing issues of social isolation and loneliness. Effective centres can build local relationships between communities, strengthen group relationships and help reduce social isolation. Multicultural Australia's Welcome Hub model recognises this and we see their role as key in addressing social isolation in local communities. For community centres to be effective, they need appropriate resourcing and support to implement appropriate strategies to address social isolation. Multicultural Australia currently partners with 18 Welcome Hubs across South East Queensland.

¹⁷ Multicultural Australia's *Luminous Lantern Parade* is an annual cultural spectacle of solidarity and support by the broader public, for people from diverse backgrounds, especially refugees, migrants and people seeking asylum. From a modest start, *Luminous* has grown into an iconic Queensland event, hosting over 10,000 attendees and participants in 2021, and over 20,000 attendees and participants in 2019. This year, *Luminous* has expanded into Brisbane's suburbs and beyond, through *Neighbourhood Events*, in partnership with key community centres (Belong Acacia Ridge Community Centre, Kallangur Community Centres, Mt Gravatt Community Centres and Inala Community Centre) – engaging them in promoting inclusion and belonging, while celebrating the rich cultural traditions of Brisbane's diverse communities. The success of *Luminous in the Neighbourhood* attests to the importance of local community-based presence through planned and resourced hubs and community centres. As referenced in the previous footnote, these centres are key to organising activities and events that mobilise community and bring people together. The successful delivery of *Luminous* demonstrates that much can be done to bring people and communities together, using existing community assets.

¹⁸ In 2019, Multicultural Australia were able to survey just over 200 participants at MOSAIC. Of those surveyed: 96% of respondents agreed that cultural diversity is good for Queensland; 94% of respondents agreed that migrants and refugees make a valuable economic, cultural, and social contribution to Queensland; 95% of respondents agreed that MOSAIC have a positive impact on promoting cultural diversity and inclusion in Queensland; 99% of respondents were satisfied with MOSAIC and would come again; 99% of respondents would recommend MOSAIC to their friends and families.

major events into Virtual Events, reaching over 238,000 people online with 95,000+ video views across social media.

- Support through sponsorship, participation in and/or provision of resources to local regional events to promote inclusion, such as Toowoomba Languages and Culture's Festival, Carnival of Joy, Ipswich Harmony Day and Rockhampton's Taste of the World Festival;
- Creating a dedicated campaign of connection around the COVID-19 pandemic. We ran the '*Culture of Connection*' campaign from the early days of the pandemic through the peak lockdown period (March to May 2020). This campaign enabled individuals, communities, and organisations to submit their stories and messages as a way to connect with others and share messages of hope and resilience. The campaign featured 37 stories of hope and resilience; campaign videos were viewed 287,835 times.

Increasing Employment Opportunities:

Dedicated programs to support and aid economic participation, and employment of individuals can promote social inclusion as it brings about broader community interactions as well as financial independence.

- *Work and Welcome*: Multicultural Australia runs a dedicated work place employment support program – *Work and Welcome* to provide a twelve-week, paid placement of refugee or immigrant community members into participating Australian workplaces. The program supports two-way interactions and integration – supporting community members to secure their first work experience in Australia. For host employers, it secures significant benefits around a diverse, globally connected workforce, as well as increased social capital through connections and values shared by the organisational workplace.

Anti-discrimination, anti-racism, and stigma interventions:

Targeted interventions can improve community attitudes toward community issues around diversity, mental illness, and disability. Approaches to such interventions should include long-term interventions incorporating varied formats like education and community activities.

- Multicultural Australia has been a long supporter of national campaigns against Racism (e.g., *Racism it Stops with Me*); and the work of the Queensland Human Rights

Commission. Our Chief Executive Officer, is currently the co-chair and member of the Cohesive Communities Coalition, and Multicultural Australia were actively part of a campaign calling for stronger laws around serious vilification and hate crimes.

Multicultural Australia supports targeted interventions to support individuals and communities to overcome marginalisation and isolation within their community, and the wider Australian public. The range of programs and interventions noted above provide an indication of the variety and depth of initiatives that can assist communities in addressing barriers to belonging, and thus stem loneliness and isolation.

There are various programs and interventions available to different groups and cohorts across Queensland. However, very often there are limitations to their access and reach into a wider audience (e.g., eligibility criteria, time specificity of interventions, restricted length and/or scope due to funding, etc.)

We are seeking a comprehensive strategy around loneliness and isolation that looks into what works for different community groups and individuals, and can provide recommendations on interventions that can provide maximum benefit across multicultural communities.

Terms of Reference 4: *the benefits of addressing social isolation and loneliness, examples of successful initiatives undertaken nationally and internationally and how to measure social isolation and loneliness in Queensland to determine if implemented strategies are effective*

The benefits of addressing loneliness and social isolation are increasingly identified; there is dedicated effort nationally and internationally to address these. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about an increased attention to this social issue. The appointments of Minister of Loneliness in Britain and Japan highlight the importance that is being placed to these considerations¹⁹.

There are initiatives available for the Inquiry's consideration into any strategy around loneliness and social isolation in Queensland. The UK Government's **Loneliness Strategy (2018)**²⁰ provides detailed considerations around:

¹⁹ [Why we need a minister for loneliness \(smh.com.au\)](https://www.smh.com.au)

²⁰ Macdonald, M, Kulakiewicz, A *et al.* See n.1

- Recommended approaches to measure loneliness;
- Initiatives to enable everyday services to connect with people at risk of loneliness, such as 'social prescribing';
- Consideration of loneliness in the housing and planning system, and strengthening local infrastructure and developing community spaces;
- Reducing stigma and raising awareness of the importance of social connections; and
- Supporting community groups and digital inclusion (i.e., having the skills to use digital devices, connectivity, and appropriate assistive technology).

There is some research on 'Social prescribing' or 'community referral' with links to improved quality of life (including loneliness), and health. Social prescribing can link individuals in the community to existing local non-clinical health, welfare, and social support services and activities linked with voluntary and community sector organizations. These kinds of programs have also been found appropriate for reaching a range of high-risk populations including recent migrants, older adults, economically and linguistically isolated populations. An issue with the delivery of such programs would be access in the local settings and to resources. However, online alternatives, especially explored and learnt through the COVID-19 pandemic, could be an alternative to meet needs²¹.

Key research on this is available in Queensland through the University of Queensland's School of Psychology around "Social Cure"²². This research includes social prescribing and 'Groups4Health' as evidence-based interventions that directly targets the psychological distress that results from loneliness and social isolation.

The *Ways to Wellness program*²³ is a world-leading social prescribing network in the Mount Gravatt area of Brisbane. This has been developed through a community organising process led by the Queensland Community Alliance in collaboration with University of Queensland, and funded by the Queensland Government. The program provides a significant example for a Queensland State-wide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness.

With respect to identifying appropriate measures of loneliness or social isolation, we would like to note the importance of paying particular attention to the inclusion of people from diverse backgrounds in such measures; as well as the importance of ensuring that the chosen

²¹ Warr, D., Cox, J., & Redshaw, S. (see n.3)

²² See [A social cure for better health \(uq.edu.au\)](https://www.uq.edu.au/social-cure)

²³ See [Ways To Wellness - Loneliness - Social Isolation](#)

measures are appropriate and easily available across cultures, languages and experiences²⁴.

Terms of Reference 5: *how current investment by the Queensland Government, other levels of government, the non-government, corporate and other sectors may be leveraged to prevent, mitigate and address the drivers and impacts of social isolation and loneliness across Queensland, including:*

- *services and programs such as health and mental health, transport, housing, education, employment and training, sport and recreation, community services and facilities, digital inclusion, volunteering, the arts and culture, community development, and planning for accessible, inclusive and connected communities*
 - *targeted support to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and those most at risk*
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Multicultural Australia service experience attests to how innovative program design that is driven by client/community voice and experience, and delivered in community and in partnership with key stakeholders - contributes to achieving significant outcomes for refugees and immigrants. These programs are available to extend in scope through partnerships with government, corporate, and community sectors. Significant programs such as; community events (e.g., *Luminous Lantern Parade* and *Mosaic Multicultural Festival*); the Work and Welcome employment program; Connecting through Sport program; and the Redbank Plains Community Centre can provide easy entry pathways to design programs aimed at addressing social isolation and inclusion for diverse communities.

The Queensland wide network of community centres also provide a significant opportunity to provide targeted programs to address social isolation. Multicultural Australia's Welcome Hubs model across Brisbane in partnership with local community centres supporting community conversations and cultural connections provides a model for consideration throughout Queensland.

The networks and partnerships described above are intentionally created to provide entry points to support the welcome and inclusion of culturally and linguistically diverse communities across Queensland. These models and programs are available for the Inquiry's consideration on potentially leveraging their success and benefits across other population groups in Queensland;

²⁴ The British Red Cross research (see n.9) noted that the surveys and research intended to investigate loneliness and barriers to belonging came up against the barriers already noted – like language barriers, lack of trust or not feeling invested in a service, as well as stigma around admitting loneliness or asking for help. Further, the identified measures of loneliness may themselves be excluding. For example, this research used the UCLA loneliness scale that has been validated for use in some different languages. However, some ambiguity was noted in the understanding around the language used in survey questions and measures – requiring an emphasis on the need to explore people's experiences of loneliness in a more qualitative way alongside the use of the UCLA scale.

as well for the consideration of these programs in the design of appropriate interventions in 'social prescribing'.

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- **Terms of Reference 6:** *the role, scope, and priorities of a state-wide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness, considering interactions with existing Queensland and national strategies*
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A State-wide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness should be comprehensive, providing awareness of the importance of social connectedness and the risks of isolation; providing appropriate recommendations to measure loneliness, as well as prescribing appropriate interventions to connect people at risk of loneliness. Such a strategy should maintain a clear focus on 'place', with locally-based community interventions (i.e., community hubs, community centres, community spaces) that bring people together to connect and contribute to community and civic life. This is particularly important for activities that bring people together across language and cultural barriers, to ensure a tailored approach to participants. Place-based interventions to address social isolation, which involve co-design and implementation with community, should be resourced to inform local projects and future strategies, or where successful, replicated in other regions.

The design of any such strategy should include the voice and experience of people who are isolated and lonely. Diverse community voices – including those of refugee and immigrant cohorts need to be a key consideration. In doing so, it is also important to consider the many challenges that may prevent affected people from engaging and providing their experience. Our submission has sought to highlight the many barriers to community participation faced by people from refugee and immigrant backgrounds. It is also important to remember the **intersectionality** of an individual from CALD background with other factors like age, visa status, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, geographic location, etc. It is recommended that any strategy on social isolation for Queensland consider priority areas and cohorts – like youth, women, elderly, place-based approaches, digital inclusion, etc.

In addition to the above considerations, a State-wide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness should necessarily interact with national programs, strategies, and interventions around – **racism and discrimination**; the work of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of **people with disability** as well as consider a **digital inclusion** strategy.

COVID-19 has highlighted concerns around loneliness and social isolation – however, in our experience, the pandemic has served to provide a spotlight on many issues and exclusions already prevalent in our community.

A State-wide strategy on social isolation and loneliness is an important entry into considerations on the social resilience, economic security, and social cohesion of our Queensland community. The Community Support and Services Committee should consider coordination across sectors and the different levels of government around the design and priorities for this strategy.

Recommendations

Multicultural Australia would like to make the following recommendations to this Inquiry:

- Consider the inclusion of the voice of people affected by isolation and loneliness, including diverse community cohorts across Queensland:
 - Conduct community engagement through trusted sources and intermediaries (e.g., community associations, faith, and ethnic groups etc.) to secure the representation of diverse voices;
- Involve community in the design of various aspects of the State-wide strategy, including:
 - Community education to raise awareness of the risks from loneliness and address stigma among people experiencing these issues and challenges;
 - Design of appropriate interventions to address loneliness and social isolation;
 - Ensuring the appropriate remuneration of community members involved in the design and input to the strategy.
- Conduct further research around developing measures of loneliness that resonates across different languages and cultures;
- Consider ‘social prescribing’ as a key pillar to the Queensland strategy – expanding the *Ways to Wellness* initiative already available;
- Invest in specific initiatives (e.g., volunteering), events (e.g., cultural celebrations), community spaces, hubs and activities (e.g., women’s groups), that bring people together at a local level to form social and inter-cultural connections;
- Increase base-funding for Community Neighbourhood Centres, including consideration of key community centres based in growing regions which are not annually funded by Queensland Government;
- Development of a Digital Inclusion Strategy for Queensland.