

**2024**

**ENDING  
LONELINESS  
IN THE  
CITY**

**Community Forum  
Summary Report**

**Office of Councillor Sylvie Ellsmore  
City of Sydney Council**

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**Thank you!** Thanks to the individuals and groups that helped organise the June 2023 'Ending Loneliness in the City' forum, particularly the local resident action groups who make up the 4CCCs, Inner Sydney Voice, Wayside Chapel and the Sydney Alliance.

Big thanks also to Adam Antonelli, Morgan Westley, Marjorie Tenchavez, Andrew Blake and Caroline Alcorso with help organising the forum, and for the research, analysis and drafting to bring this report together.

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# 1 . INTRODUCTION

A lack of community connection and belonging – loneliness – is a growing health, social and economic issue for our communities. Social isolation and loneliness can significantly impact people’s health and wellbeing, and are shaped by wider environmental, cultural, socio-economic, and political circumstances. It impacts people of all backgrounds, but particularly younger people, people who live alone, and people on low incomes.

Social isolation and loneliness have been growing in Australia – and in other cities around the world. The COVID-19 pandemic increased the level of loneliness in our communities, including in Sydney. For example, Sydney is said to be one of the hardest places in the world to make friends.

The places where we live, work and play, can promote meaningful social interactions and help us build a sense of connection. This is particularly important as our cities grow and become more dense. As more people live in smaller spaces like apartments, access to shared and public spaces to connect become even more important.

*“You can feel lonely even if you are surrounded by other people.”*

Around the world and in Australia, organisations and governments – including local councils – are learning more about loneliness, and what can be done to increase social and community connections, including through community-led programs, awareness, public spaces, community centres, health services, the built environment and more.



On June 8 2023 at the Sydney Town Hall around 60 people including representatives of resident action groups, social and community organisations, and researchers from the City of Sydney Local Government Area, attended a forum about loneliness in the city. The forum focused on three themes:

- What is known about loneliness, particularly as it impacts those in the inner-city?
- What works to prevent loneliness?
- What opportunities are there at the local level, for those living and working in the inner city, and the City of Sydney Council, to address loneliness?

The forum was co-hosted by Councillor Sylvie Ellsmore (City of Sydney), Sydney Alliance, Wayside Chapel, the Coalition of Caring for Community Centres (4CCCs), Inner Sydney Voice and the Greens.

Panel Speakers were:

- Jon Owen (CEO of Wayside Chapel)
- Marika Kontellis (Executive Officer of Inner Sydney Voice and Council for the Ageing)
- Melanie Tait (Millers Point Community Centre and representative of the Coalition for Caring for Community Centres - the 4CCCs)
- Marlee Bower (Research Fellow at the University of Sydney's Matilda Centre and social isolation researcher)
- Eliza Putnis (student leader, Sydney Alliance) and
- Councillor Sylvie Ellsmore (former City of Sydney Deputy Mayor – Chair)

This report summarises some of the main points from the discussion on the day, along with some highlights from relevant research about loneliness and examples from other countries about what is working to address loneliness, including local councils. It includes recommendations and suggestions for action that could be taken at the local level to address loneliness and increase social connection.

## We want to hear your ideas and feedback!

Please send feedback and ideas about actions that could be taken at the local level in the inner-city to:

Email: [SEllsmore@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au](mailto:SEllsmore@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au)

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## 2. WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT LONELINESS IN THE CITY?

A lack of social connection and feelings of loneliness are growing health, social and economic challenges for our communities.

Loneliness has been linked to premature death, poor physical and mental health, greater psychological distress and general dissatisfaction with life.[1]

Internationally, social isolation and loneliness are increasingly being recognised as major public health issues.[2]

The COVID-19 pandemic increased loneliness in our communities, including in Sydney[3]. Around 1 in 3 Australians report feeling lonely – with 1 in 6 estimated to experience severe loneliness.

People today have around half as many friends as in the mid-1980s.[4] Time Out magazine has ranked Sydney as one of the most challenging places in the world to make friends.[5]

Loneliness is shaped by people's environmental, cultural, and socio-economic circumstances. Loneliness impacts people at different points in their lives, particularly at key points of transition.

As highlighted by a number of the speakers at the Sydney Town Hall forum held in June 2023, young people, older people, and new parents are some of the key groups impacted by loneliness and social isolation. In 2023, twenty-two per cent (22%) of young people in Australia (18 to 24-year-olds) reported often or always feeling lonely, higher than the national average of 15%, and the highest age group in our population.[6]

Poverty and inequality are important determinants of loneliness. Other drivers of loneliness are thought to include long hours spent working and/or caring, living alone, and declining participation in church and other groups.

Many people feel too embarrassed or ashamed to admit feeling lonely to others. Inner Sydney Voice[7] and Wayside Chapel[8] are two organisations based in the inner-city of Sydney who have identified the connection between loneliness and inequality, and had developed programs to reduce the stigma around loneliness.

Another of the speakers at the Sydney Town Hall forum, Dr Marlee Bower, helped lead a major Australian study that analysed the impact of the COVID pandemic on loneliness in Australia.[9] That research found that the pandemic opened up new "inequalities" in loneliness, with higher rates of loneliness months later.



From left to right: Councillor Sylvie Ellsmore, Eliza Putnis, Jon Owen, Marika Kontellis, Marlee Bower and Melanie Tait.

Dr Bower and her team found that “people with a physical disability, single people (not in a relationship), those with low incomes, and those lacking strong social ties before COVID had higher levels of loneliness during lockdowns – and persistent loneliness afterwards.”[8] People without secure homes – renters – were another key group particularly impacted by loneliness and social isolation.

The inner-city is home to many people born overseas, and a large number of international students. The Sydney Town Hall forum attendees also identified international students as a group at risk of loneliness. Nearly half of recently arrived immigrants (people who’ve come in the last ten years) report they feel isolated “some of the time or often.”[9]

## **SOME INSIGHTS FROM INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH ON LONELINESS**

The Australian picture appears to have a lot in common with what has been identified overseas. For example, the United Kingdom established a national strategy to tackle loneliness in 2018[10] after finding “chronic loneliness” impacts a significant number of people, but particularly people who are:

- 16-24 years old
- female
- single or widowed
- living with a limiting mental health condition
- renting
- have lower neighbourhood belonging or
- have lower local social trust.

These factors intersect, with loneliness in London unequally and disproportionately impacting people who are LGBTQIA+, people who are deaf or disabled, or who are from particular ethnic groups.[11]

Other countries taking action to address loneliness include Northern Ireland, and Japan – which are enacting legislation aimed at tackling social isolation and loneliness in the country following a 2022 government survey that found 40% of respondents in the country aged 16 years and older felt lonely.[12]

# 3. WHAT WORKS TO PREVENT LONELINESS?

Community activities that nurture friendships and informal connections and relationships where people help each other out strengthen our social fabric. Older and retired Australians are the most likely to be involved in social, community and civic groups, while people struggling financially are less so.[15]

In addition to a large number of international students, the inner-city includes a significant number of new migrants.[16] For migrants to Australia, it can take time to connect to new communities and form new friendships. Finding and joining religious groups, school networks and other community organisations are important ways to build social connections.

Some insights participants in the June 2023 Sydney Town Hall forum emphasised are below and in sections 4 and 5 of this report.

## Community leaders and community-led groups are the stewards of their local communities

The City of Sydney has some 30 Resident Action Groups, and a large number of volunteer groups, community organisations and activist groups. Local community and volunteer organisations play a key role in bringing people together, and advocating for community needs. For example:

*“Pyrmont Supports is a group of about 50 people who have committed to support each other as we get older. It is completely self-funded and open to anybody...As one member said the other day, Pyrmont Supports saved my life.”*

*SQuAD is the Sydney Queer and Disability Group which is an online group of members who connect and support each other.*

*BIKESydney is a not-for-profit association that organises regular social rides and gatherings and has many opportunities to become involved as a volunteer.*

*City North Men’s Shed in Millers Point is a place for people of any gender to share skills and make friends.*

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## **Well-maintained spaces and well-designed, inclusive, and accessible public spaces allow for both planned and unexpected social interactions**

A forum participant spoke about how the aged care centres she works are designed to allow workers to monitor residents, but not to help residents connect easily and form friendship groups.

Another commented:

*'Higher density and living closer together sadly hasn't meant we all become more socially connected.'*

This feedback about the important role of public and community spaces is consistent with decades of research about the importance of the design of spaces for creating connected communities.

*'Over time, the Pyrmont Community Centre has become a lively hub where we can just drop in for a chat to the wonderful staff, and also initiate activities such as Pyrmont Sings! the Stitching Circle, Over 55s exercise, ... monthly community dinners, playgroups and the book exchange.'*

Places enable opportunities to facilitate connections between people and neighbourhoods, whether planned or unplanned. Public spaces should also be flexible so that they can respond to new and emerging needs and provide opportunities for local communities to occupy vacant spaces to develop community-led projects. An inclusive and flexible approach to public spaces can foster greater connection and pride.

## 4. WHAT CAN BE DONE AT A LOCAL LEVEL TO ADDRESS LONELINESS?

Local councils, as the level of government closest to the community, play a key role in supporting community connection and addressing social isolation. Council spaces, including community centres, libraries, parks and town halls, in the past and today, are important places where the community can come together.

The City of Sydney, like many local councils, delivers a wide range of cultural, social and recreational programs, including for young people, older residents, culturally diverse communities, the LGBTIQ+ community including rainbow young people, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Libraries and community centres offer a range of activities for parents and children. Some community spaces are staffed, others are unstaffed and available to book through the council's website. The City of Sydney has recently introduced a fee waiver for non-commercial community groups wanting to use council community spaces.

Council also provides support for community gardens and guerilla gardening clubs which bring neighbours together for low cost activities, manages sporting fields and public parks, and provide a wide range of grants for local community activities.

Some ideas and feedback from the Sydney Town Hall forum about what was working, or what could be done differently at the local level, included:

### **01 Programs and activities run by or supported by council are important for increasing social connection and addressing loneliness**

- ✓ Councils offer many free or low-cost programs at council community centres and libraries. Melbourne Council employs social workers in libraries. Targeted programs – programs designed to build social cohesion between groups, such as intergenerational connection and improved connectivity between different cultures. These could be increased.

- ✓ Local community centres with decades of history and knowledge of their local communities are important. Not-for-profit community centres such as Glebe Youth Services and Counterpoint Community Services should continue to be supported and acknowledged for their pivotal role in their respective communities.

## **02**

### **There are some simple ideas that could be implemented now to help connect communities ('low-hanging fruit' ideas)**

- ✓ Bring back noticeboards and information racks in libraries and community centres and make them easier to access without applying for approval. Many have disappeared in recent years. They allow people to join activities and groups without entering a building and allow groups to easily advertise their events.

One participant reported that their local notice board had been removed from their local library, and they weren't sure why

Another participant reported being told they needed approval from the council to vet material to put on a library noticeboard, notifying of a community dinner being put on connect local residents with newly arrived migrants.

- ✓ Locals have been organising to provide mutual aid, including training volunteers. Council support for these groups in the form of access to space for their activities, grants and other forms of practical support, makes a real difference, especially when groups are made up of volunteers.

- ✓ Council libraries are increasingly key spaces where people come together – they could be open for longer.

Forestville library in north-western Sydney has 24-hour access for registered users. This was introduced during the COVID pandemic and became permanent.

- ✓ Community sport is a key way that people connect, particularly younger men. However, even small fees to hire council fields can prevent people from playing sports regularly.

*"If want to hire a field to play a few times a week with a group, the costs add up, it can be a real barrier, especially for low-income households."*

✓Green spaces bring people together: Build and maintain inviting gardens and green spaces where connections can happen easily. More green places to rest and chat are needed especially as the city grows, and people have less space in their apartments.

## **03**

### **Community leadership is key**

✓ The participants at the forum highlighted that one of the most important roles for councils and government was to support the community to organise or lead initiatives to address social isolation and loneliness.

For example, REDWatch is a local residents' action group that meets in person to monitor government planning and development in Redfern, Eveleigh, Darlington and Waterloo. It holds regular discussion forums on topics of importance to the community, including on addressing loneliness in social housing communities.

## **04**

### **The role of community centres and libraries are vital to addressing social isolation**

There was strong support for council to ensure there is a community centre within walking distance of every neighbourhood and make sure it has adequate funding and is well-maintained. Libraries were also identified as important Council run spaces.

At centres and libraries:

- ✓Community programs should be designed and led together by the communities they support
- ✓Activities and events should be free or low cost
- ✓Inter-group programs (e.g. inter-generational, intercultural) are valuable
- ✓Rooms should be accessible and easy to hire for private events, and group classes and meetings
- ✓ Where possible, there should be funded staff who know the local community, do outreach, and help community groups implement their ideas.

## **COALITION FOR CARING FOR COMMUNITY CENTRES (4CCCS) LOCAL COMMUNITY CENTRES PILOT IDEA**

Community centres play a vital role in improving quality of life: providing activities for mental and physical health, strengthening connections, creating support networks, building resilience and fighting loneliness.

Representatives of resident action groups in the City of Sydney recently formed a group called the Coalition for Caring for Community Centres (the 4CCCs), to advocate for protecting and expanding community centres in the inner-city.

The 4CCCs reported that community centres in the inner-city have strong connections with their communities, and as we recover from Covid-19, their programs are being revived and increasingly well attended.

However, others lost these connections as centres closed during the pandemic. Some communities are without a centre after the closure of previous community centres.

Recognising that communities have different demographics and needs, the 4CCCs for a blend of staffed and unstaffed centres - with a slightly different approach for each. Some have active members willing to initiate activities; others need support from Council staff to engage residents and 'get things going again'.

**The 4CCCs presented their proposal to the forum that the City of Sydney support a 12-month pilot, designed with the resident action group and with success measures, involving increased council staff at a nominated community centre who would focus on reaching out to residents and supporting residents to lead activities designed to address social isolation.**

## 5 . BROADER REFORMS TO CONSIDER

'Social prescribing' is when a doctor or community worker helps connect someone with community activities and social groups – that are best suited or tailored to their individual needs – as a way to address loneliness or other health concerns.

In the UK, the British Red Cross has delivered a national social prescribing service since 2015 for people who were experiencing, or at risk of, loneliness, as well as anxiety, obesity, smoking and poor mental health.[17] A number of local borough councils have established social prescribing teams in cooperation with the National Health Service.

As the London Borough of Waltham Forest explains:

*Social Prescribing (SP) involves supporting patients and residents to improve their health and social welfare by connecting them to local community services run by the local council, health, or voluntary and community organisations.*

*By having a conversation with an SP, residents can focus on what really matters to them as an individuals and can then be connected to community groups that provide more specific practical and emotional support. This helps those with long-term health conditions, who feel isolated, or who need support with their mental health. People with some complex social needs can also benefit from social prescribing due to the positive effect it can have on their wellbeing.[18]*

Social prescribing is currently being trialled in a number of local Public Health Networks (PHNs) including in Sydney. Effective socially prescribing requires health and community workers to be aware of what local community activities and social groups to connect people to, particular activities available at low or no cost, as commonly provided by councils, local charities or local residents.

Ideas to support social prescribing for loneliness at the local level include:

- ✓Ensure information about community programs and services in the local area, that people can be referred to, is readily available, for example through a council-run database.
- ✓Train council-employed staff (e.g. in service centres) to fill 'social prescriptions' for people who need to overcome isolation.
- ✓Support local networks of organisations to develop and implement strategies and actions to address loneliness together.

**Embed addressing loneliness in government and council plans:** Japan has recently enacted laws to prevent loneliness and isolation, following research that identified that loneliness – previously identified as a significant health and social issue – had been worsened following the COVID pandemic.[19]

The Japanese laws place obligations on local councils to establish and implement policies regarding measures to address loneliness and isolation, in coordination with the national government and other local governments, including by establishing regional support groups for lonely people.[20]

In the UK, the national strategy for tackling loneliness includes priority actions at the local level, including support for pilot projects with local councils to make it easier to access information about local community groups, activities and support services for loneliness.[21]

A 'Tackling Loneliness Network' of government and non-government organisations was established, with an action plan to tackle loneliness as part of a 'connected recovery' from COVID-19. The actions include training for council and health workers to '**embed kindness**' in their work with people experiencing social isolation.

The City of Sydney Council has set a target in its Community Strategic Plan that by 2050 community cohesion and social interaction will have increased, based on at least 75% of the local resident population feeling part of the community, agreeing most people can be trusted and believing that when needed, they can get help from their neighbours. Actions are linked to the target, which are publicly reported on quarterly and annually.

Ideas to help embed addressing loneliness in government and council plans at the local level include:

- ✓ Ensure specific and targeted strategies to address loneliness and social isolation are included in council plans and policies
- ✓ Train council-employed staff to 'embed kindness' when they deal with residents.
- ✓ Consider how different aspects of council's work could impact on social isolation and loneliness, including ensuring public and private developments are designed to facilitate social connection.

## **SOME OTHER INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES OF LOCAL ACTIONS TO ADDRESS LONELINESS**

In the **Netherlands**, Jumbo Supermarket has initiated the *kletskaassa* - a slow checkout lane in which the cashiers take time for chit-chat and small talk, aimed at people new to the area.

Actions to improve access to online support - particularly for older people and people on low incomes - are core parts of many strategies to address social isolation and loneliness.

An overseas council example is the **Stockport Council in the United Kingdom**, which launched the *DigiKnow Alliance* in 2018 by, so that local residents could provide digital support to others in trusted community settings. As of 2023, some 47,000 people have been helped to get online or improve their digital confidence and skills.

The DigiKnow Helpline has managed over 16,000 calls and messages. 348 Digital Champions and DigiKnow Friends have been trained to provide digital support. And a Device Recycling and Refurbishment scheme has received more than 4,000 donations to date, providing low-cost computers to the community and reducing the amount of e-waste going to landfill.

# **NEXT STEPS - WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

Around the world and in Australia, organisations and governments – including local Councils – are learning more about loneliness and what can be done to increase social and community connections. There is agreement that loneliness is a social problem that requires a social solution.

The 2023 forum held at Sydney Town Hall helped identify some of the community's main concerns and opportunities for action, focused on the inner-city of Sydney and actions. Some of these ideas are being implemented by local council or local groups.

We would love to hear your feedback, including additional programs or ideas to inform actions that could be taken through local council or other local organisations in the inner city

## **We want to hear your ideas and feedback!**

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Email: [SEllsmore@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au](mailto:SEllsmore@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au)

Phone: 0439 300 150

# END NOTES

[1] See for example: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Social Isolation and Loneliness webpage, at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/mental-health/topic-areas/social-isolation-and-loneliness> and Lim, M. Smith, B. Owen, K. Engel, L. Smith, B. for Ending Loneliness Together (2023) *State of the Nation Report – Social Connection in Australia 2023*, at [https://endingloneliness.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/ELT\\_LNA\\_Report\\_Digital.pdf](https://endingloneliness.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/ELT_LNA_Report_Digital.pdf)

[2] See for example World Health Organisation, *Social Isolation and Loneliness* webpage and resources, available from <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/social-isolation-and-loneliness>.

[3] See research by *Ending Loneliness Together* at <https://endingloneliness.com.au/>, *Mapping Social Cohesion: Australian Society in 2023*, available from the Scanlon Foundation [www.scanlonfoundation.org.au](http://www.scanlonfoundation.org.au), and Bower et al (below).

[4] Dr Andrew Leigh (2023), "Opinion piece: Rebuilding communities in a 'friendship recession'", 22nd May 2023. <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au>

[5] 'Sydney has been ranked as the third-worst city in the world for making new friends' 13 July 2022 in *Time Out* at <https://www.timeout.com/sydney/news/sydney-has-been-ranked-as-the-third-worst-city-in-the-world-for-making-new-friends-071322>

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[7] See *Alone Together* study, University of Sydney, at <https://www.sydney.edu.au/matilda-centre/news-and-events/2020/12/16/alone-together-study.html>

[8] See Dr Marlee Bower and Associate Professor Roger Patulny, June 2022 'We asked the public about being lonely during lockdowns. For many, Zoom calls weren't enough – and some still haven't recovered', in the *Conversation*, at <https://theconversation.com/we-asked-the-public-about-being-lonely-during-lockdowns-for-many-zoom-calls-werent-enough-and-some-still-havent-recovered-185586>

[9] Statista (2024) 'Feelings of social isolation and intercultural friendship among migrant groups in Australia in 2023, by migration background' webpage at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1446769/australia-social-isolation-and-intercultural-friendship-among-migrant-groups>

[10] See: UK Government – 'UK Government's work on tackling loneliness' webpage at [www.gov.uk/guidance/governments-work-on-tackling-loneliness](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/governments-work-on-tackling-loneliness)

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[11] *Reconceptualising Loneliness in London* (2022) report available on the Mayor of London/ London Assembly webpage 'Loneliness in London', here: <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/communities-and-social-justice/loneliness-london>

[12] Article – 'Supporting social connections across the life course', in *The Lancet Healthy Longevity*, Volume 5, Issue 4e, April 2024

[13] Owen, et al (2023) *State of the Nation Report – Social Connection in Australia 2023*, as above.

[14] See profile of City of Sydney on Community ID (drawing on Census data) at <https://profile.id.com.au/sydney>

[5] See <https://innersydneyvoice.org.au/>

[16] See <https://www.waysidechapel.org.au/>

[17] See for example, British Red Cross and Co-op (2019) *Fulfilling the Promise: How Social Prescribing Can Best Treat Loneliness* report, available at <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/news-and-media/media-centre/press-releases/social-prescribing-is-a-vital-part-of-treatment-to-tackle-loneliness>.

[18] See Waltham Forest *Social Prescribing service* webpage, at <https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/health-and-wellbeing/waltham-forest-social-prescribing-service>

[19] See article 'Japan was already grappling with isolation and loneliness. The pandemic made it worse' April 2023, *CNN World* online at <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/06/asia/japan-hikikomori-study-covid-intl-hnk/index.html>

[20] See Japanese 'Act on the Advancement of Measures to Address Loneliness and Isolation', passed in June 2023.

[21] See UK Government strategy paper 'A connected society: A Strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change' (2018) available from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-connected-society-a-strategy-for-tackling-loneliness>