

Nurturing social connection and addressing loneliness in Community Centres in South Australia



Research Report

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Social Work Innovation
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Ninna Marni

The Flinders University SWIRLs team recognise that Flinders Social Work operates on the traditional lands and waters of Kurna Peoples, and we pay respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge their sovereignty and continued responsibility to care for country.

We respect the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, languages and spirituality and their relationship with country.

Flinders Social Work Commitment

We are committed to truth telling about the history of social work education and practice in this State and working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities to achieve a shared vision for reconciliation.

Community Centres SA

This research project was initiated by Community Centres SA (CCSA), the peak body for 110 Community Centres and Neighbourhood Houses across SA. At their heart, Community Centres exist to empower local communities to have a voice and build meaningful social connections. By engaging Flinders University to undertake this research, CCSA has supported the community centre sector in ongoing reflective practice about how it can best address loneliness evident in many of the 35,000 people that participate in local place-based community spaces each week.

We thank CCSA, and in particular their CEO Kylie Ferguson for her commitment to improving the lives of South Australian's who work, volunteer and utilise community centres by developing partnerships to produce research informed best-practice.

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The research team for this project were:

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Acknowledgments



Executive Summary

This project set out to investigate which programs in Community Centres in South Australia build social connection, and by doing so address the issues of social isolation and loneliness in their communities. The findings outlined in this report demonstrate that a much of the existing practice and service delivery by staff and volunteers in community centres reflects the recent literature in this area.

The project invited community centres to participate in the project through Community Centres SA networks. 15 community centres responded to the EOI and participated in a focus group. 123 people participated across the 15 focus groups. Participating community centres included a spread of socio-economic areas across the greater Adelaide region, the Adelaide Hills and regional South Australia.

This report focusses on three themes that reflect common practice of successful programs:

- 1 Planning
- 2 Getting started
- 3 In-between spaces and beyond

This report expands on these themes to describe the following practices:

- Plan ahead
- Develop your volunteers
- Be visible in the community
- Welcome and help people feel safe
- Physical Space: Green and Blue Bumping Spaces
- Bumping Spaces: in-between and beyond

These findings are outlined in the major component of this report. A secondary focus of the project was to gain insights into the data community centres already collect to measure the success of their programs. The project found that community centres in SA are required to collect a range of data on their funded programs for reporting purposes. For many centres this has become an administrative burden. Typically, the data is quantitative that focusses on the instrumental aspects of their programs and does not meaningfully capture the often hidden work on social connections.

The following section in this report turns to how existing practices compare to recent literature on promoting meaningful social connection in community centres. Contemporary research shows there is a strong synergy between the current practices in community centres in SA. This section also highlights that while these synergies exist, it is often viewed as a by-product of intuitive practice by volunteers and staff in community centres. The impact of the community centre initiatives could be enhanced if these intuitive practices were strengthened through intentional conversation and planning that focussed building the infrastructure around the spaces, places and times that connection happens.

This report concludes by making recommendations on how Community Centres SA can work with its members to replicate the common successful programs identified in this report. Based on these findings this report also recommends the following:

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- Formally identify community connectors
- Be more explicit around key terms
- Diversify volunteer base
- Create social and physical bumping spaces
- Build in evaluation

Some of the findings in this report might be described as common sense or long-held practices in social and community work. The presentation of these particular insights in this report is not intended as a new or novel finding, however, in the contemporary political and social context it is fair to suggest they are undervalued or run counter to the kinds of funding, support and reporting requirements that are imposed on community centres.

Documenting known practice principles in this report demonstrates their continued relevance in contrast to the politically dominant ways thinking about and valuing people and community. This report provides evidence of what works, and from the perspective of the participants these common sense practices continue to hold significant value.

To address the problem of social isolation and loneliness, this project offers a perspective on the value of an interconnected and holistic network of practices. This approach moves beyond the myopic focus on measures such as attendance and the funding of discreet programs as a short-term intervention. Instead, this approach supports and understanding of social isolation and loneliness as problems not simply characterised by individual factors but embedded in the historic and enduring structures of contemporary society.





Background

Community Centres SA is the peak body for 110 Community Centres around South Australia. Nurturing meaningful social connections and addressing loneliness is central to their role. The mission of Community Centres SA is to build the strength, capacity and influence of the community and neighbourhood centres sector through advocacy, workforce and organisational development. Community Centres SA has a long history, including being incorporated in 1983 as Community and Neighbourhood Centres Association Inc to establish a support and network organisation for community and neighbourhood centres in South Australia. In 2010 the name changed Community Centres SA Inc.

Community Centres in Australia

Community Centres can be found across Australia and are a dynamic and diverse community resource (Rooney, 2011) and established in South Australia in the 1970s in conjunction with the Women's Movement (O'Neil, Kaye, & Gottwald 2013). Differing in history, location, size, structure, and sources of funding. In South Australia (SA) there are over a hundred community and neighbourhood centres and houses, with over twenty being in rural SA, with over a thousand operating across Australia. Offering a variety of programs, support for community members and families they are an invaluable resource in most communities (Gauntlett, Hugman, Kenyon, & Logan, 2001; O'Neil, Kaye, & Gottwald, 2013).

Community Centres continue to adapt to an ever-changing social, political and economic landscape. Not least among these recent challenges includes the global COVID-19 pandemic which has resulted in many changes to a seamlessly connected world. One major long standing social issue that is now at the forefront of many governments, policy makers, and NGOs that operate in community setting is social isolation and loneliness (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021; Biddle, Edwards, Gray, & Sollis, 2020; Kabátek, 2020; Karg, Cotta, Farmer, & et al., 2021). The long-term impacts of loneliness and the difficulty of remaining social connected in a world where mandatory physical distancing became the norm will linger in our communities for many years (Smith & Lim, 2020). Loneliness and social isolation have always caused concern but became even more pronounced during the long-drawn-out lockdown, which kept social gatherings to a minimum (Emergency Management Act, 2020).

In Australia, Ending Loneliness Together (2017) was a coalition initiative to enable collaborative trans-disciplinary research into practice approach to tackling public health challenges of loneliness and social isolation that preceded COVID 19 and will persist post global pandemic. Several reports conducted across Australia found that community centres are ideally placed to socially plan to increase community engagement and participation, by providing spatial places to increase social networks across all age groups, to promote well-being and positively impact health outcomes (Izmir, Katz, & Bruce, 2009; Karg et al., 2021; O'Neil et al., 2013).

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Project Aims

This project was made possible by funding from Community Centres SA who received funding from the Fay Fuller Foundation. It resulted in a partnership between Community Centres SA and the Social Work Innovation Research Living Space (SWIRLS) at Flinders University. The project set out to discover:

What are the core components of successful programs/project in community centres that promote meaningful social connection to address loneliness?

How can Community Centres SA and community centres replicate these core components in other programs/projects when planning for, and seeking funding for, outcomes that enhance meaningful social connection to address loneliness?

These questions were selected so that Community Centres SA can build knowledge within the sector regarding core best practice components to that enable successful social connections. Furthermore, Community Centres SA can apply the findings to build an evidence informed toolkit to facilitate proactive planning for sustainable funding opportunities to enhance meaningful social connection.

The project was funded and initiated in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. South Australia (SA) experienced several state-wide lockdowns during 2019 and 2021, however they were comparatively short compared to other Australian States. As a result, the project methods were impacted by COVID-19. Some of the focus groups were facilitated in person, while others had to be facilitated via web-conferencing. Participants in the research talked about the impact of COVID-19 on the centre, however, this project was not primarily about COVID-19 and its impact on loneliness. The project was primarily concerned with what was working in community centres in SA in this area, so while some of the practice addressed the challenges presented by COVID-19, the report is focussed on the strengths

and assets of the centres that existed prior to and persist beyond the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns during 2019 and 2020.

SWIRLS

Flinders University, through Making a Difference: the 2025 Agenda, is committed to research that contributes to knowledge and understanding, that produces practical solutions to improve lives and benefit society. To achieve these ends, Flinders staff are encouraged to engage with local communities and stakeholders to stimulate positive societal change.

The College of Education, Psychology and Social Work at Flinders University is committed to world-class research that seeks to advance the quality of life for people across their life-span. The College brings an interdisciplinary and relational approach to working with government, professions and community to bring positive change and embrace innovative thinking.

Dr Ben Lohmeyer is a member of the Social Work Research Living Space (SWIRLS). SWIRLS is a research environment informed by appreciative inquiry and participatory action research. Such an environment allows for teams (including researchers, managers, policy makers, practitioners and clients) to directly engage with and learn from each other.





Methods

Research into programs/projects that enhance social integration and alleviate loneliness in community centres have often used a quantitative methodology (L. Dare & Nowicki, 2019; Dickens, Richards, Greaves, & Campbell, 2011). By using this methodology, participant's voices might be silenced, unsympathetically restricted by the authoritative voice of the researcher, and their experience obstructed, undermined, or even erased (Woolgar, 1983). In this context, quantitative research is often lacking reflexivity and the depth and wealth of personal experience.

For this project, fifteen focus groups were held across South Australia. Using a qualitative approach to the project offered a transdisciplinary approach (Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992) that would encourage rich descriptive accounts and differing viewpoints from a grassroots perspective that emphasises the lived experience' in the community of volunteers and employees (Nelson et al. 1992). This methodology allowed the researchers to collect rich data by primarily giving voice to those who design, organised and facilitate the programs (Depner, 1981).

Ethics approval (no. 4651) was granted by Flinders University. Community Centres SA put out an invitation through their networks for expressions of interest (EOI) from community centres to be included in the research. EOIs submitted to CCSA were forwarded onto the research team. In turn, the project team contacted the community centres with an information pack about the research, a consent form and a basic demographic form. All participants consented to being voice recorded by signing the consent form and were de-identified during the transcription process. In the report, participant quotes have been given pseudonyms that are non-identifiable. Pseudonyms identify the participants of a focus group at a community centre (i.e. "Centre 1"), but not which centre. Pseudonyms are applied consistently to all participant from a centre through the report, that is, all members of a focus group from "Centre 1" are identified as "Centre 1" throughout. The numerical values given has not significance beyond identifying the members of that centre/focus group. A new line (return) within the same quote from a single centre indicates a new speaker.

The researchers conducted fifteen focus groups located across South Australia. Two of the centres identified as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) centres. All community centres who participated in the research were under the umbrella of Community Centres SA. Participants were over eighteen years of age and were volunteers or employees who ran programs either with the explicit or implicit intention to reduce social isolation and loneliness in their community or build social connectivity. Participants consisted of both volunteers and employees. There was a gender and age bias with participants being predominantly older women aged over sixty. This trend was identified through collecting participant demographics and is reflective of a similar trend across the volunteer sector.

Focus groups were held from the beginning of October 2021, and data collection was completed by early March 2022. Focus groups were held both face-to-face or online depending on SA Health COVID restrictions and University guidelines. When the data collection began in the final months of 2021 most focus groups were all face to face. In the final stages of early 2022 the focus groups were a mix of online or face to face. One community centre provided a translator as English was a second language for all the participants. Participant numbers in focus groups ranged from four to fifteen, with focus groups typically taking up to one hour. All the focus group recording were transcribed and de-identified of participant details.

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Research Question: What are the core components and how does common practice shape programs and project to address loneliness and build social connection?

This project set out to learn from community centres about their existing practice. The project gathered insights into what community centres were already doing and what was working within these centres to address the problem of loneliness and build social connection. When asked about the programs that they offered, what programs were successful and how they designed these programs, responses from participants in the focus groups revolved around 3 main themes:

- 1 Planning
- 2 Getting started
- 3 In-between and beyond

In the focus groups and in practice, these three themes did not occur in chronological stages, but happened in overlapping and cyclical patterns. While “planning” logically happens prior to the activity, it also involved strategic thinking and human resources that were an ongoing consideration during and after programs. Likewise, the “getting started” phase takes place at the initial stages of a program, but the process of making people aware of the centre, not just a new program, might be best thought of as an ongoing exercise. Finally, as will be evident below, the final component “in between and beyond” best exemplifies the non-linear nature of successful initiatives to address loneliness in the centres. Our findings suggest building social connection might best be thought about as something that happens in between, around and after a suite of programs as distinct from the content of a discreet program.

1 PLANNING

Community centres utilised a mix of intentional and responsive planning strategies. Some Centres described strategic decision-making processes at a board or management level to intentionally target loneliness in their community. Other Centres described the outcome of addressing loneliness

as a ‘by-product’ of the range of activities they offered in response to an identified need in the community or skill among the staff or volunteers.

Centre 1: *Absolutely. It's part of our strategic plan is to address isolation and loneliness has been our strategic plan for about 7 years now.*

So we have programs, so for example we have lunch with friends. So that's every Monday, that's a lunchtime program. That's very effective at bringing people in and creating friendships and connections. We find people, their first contact with us if it's around food and there's no formality to it in terms of having to participate in an actual program that that is very useful in terms of creating friendships and opportunities for conversation.

Centre 3: *So most of the programs have that underlying goal to reduce loneliness, be it it's language, literacy, ... our fitness programs, or our social programs. The goal is to bring people out of their home... And a by-product of all these groups is that you do get that connectedness, and ... people it's not – I haven't groups that – that address isolation itself. But that's just a bi-product of community I guess.*

Centre 4: *You probably could say that the social connections possibly is a by-product but I think that when we're developing program, we always have that in our minds, that that's going to be part of it. So mosaics, Jo was meant to be ..., and she teaches mosaics. And that's essentially the main part of the program, but that's socialising that happens while they're working, it's kind of 50/50 I think. And it's always forefront of our mind when we're developing a program that will occur.*



Core Components and Common Practices

Centre 5: *Some do, some are because our social support group and social support individual are specifically targeted at social engagement. All of our programs have an element of social interaction to them; so yes, there is a by-product from every program we run, but some are specifically targeted for that.*

As these excerpts reveal, some centres had explicitly identified addressing loneliness in their strategic plan and developed discreet programs for this purpose, while other centres were less explicit but understood that it was a 'by-product' of all their activities. Community centres utilised a wide range of activities including cooking and meals, arts and craft, literacy and numeracy, mental health and drug dependency supports, adult education and exercise programs. Within this diversity of program content and methods of engagement, there were consistent approaches clustered around hosting events on significant community days, meeting physical needs and learning of new skills.

There was also a range of approaches in Centres to structured and funded programs such as Adult Community Education (funded by the South Australian Department for Innovation and Skill), Community Connections initiatives (funded by the Department of Human Services), as well as Mental Health or Alcohol Support programs (e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous). These programs provided Centres with a source of income, but also imposed on them regulatory and reporting requirements. As a result of these requirements, some Centres made strategic decisions to not seek this funding or provide these services.

Centre 4: *I'm a paid staff member. I'm here three days a week and I run the community connections program here. So a program funded by the Department of Human Services to combat social isolation.*

Centre 5: *When I started here we were ACE funded and I'm not a fan of ACE, Adult Community Education, and so the model*

around that we were not financial at all ten years ago, we had a \$25,000 deficit that year and we gave \$150,000 ACE funding back to the Department because of the expectations behind it. But our Board at the time said we're not a mini TAFE, it's not our core business; what is our core business as a community centre and that is community services, so let's get back to basics. So we gave the \$150,000 back, we took a massive risk, but we went back to our core business and that's what turned us around and it took us about three years from having zero money and saying no to everyone for everything which was awful, to being in a financial position and having a long term financial goal... we often hear from other service providers running the Commonwealth Home Support Program, how do you do eight trips a year, how do you do as much as what you do? And it is literally from putting every dollar back into services.

Centre 6: *So ... cultural and next week we have Harmony Day, we celebrate Vietnamese cultural special days. We all celebrate, yeah. So on this day people from different age you know, from young to old.*

The decision to not seek this source of funding was also connected to the needs of the community or the types of services already available in the community:

Centre 1: *Our community is a very difficult community. And the reason it's a difficult community is I call it a closed-door community. So there is lots of things going on in people's homes that they don't want people to know about. And when you consider Centrelink want to know what you're doing, housing trust want to know what you're doing, child protection services want to know what you're doing, the tax department. All of these people, job networks, all telling you what to do, when to do and how to do, often that results*

in a very closed community where people don't want anybody else having anything to do with ... So getting people to engage with us is probably the hardest part.

The decision to utilise some sources of funding (or not), as well as the decision to plan strategically or organically to address loneliness often contributed to the shape and the types of programs the Centres might offer. Yet, despite these decisions there remained a consistency to the method or content of programs Centres offered. These decisions however, had a greater influence over the degree that staff and volunteers talked to each other explicitly about loneliness and social connection. The more explicit Centres discussed loneliness at a leadership and social connection level, the more likely staff and volunteers understood their role in these terms.

Volunteers

In the planning process, the Centre's understanding of the community played a central role. The decision to adopt a particular program, method, activity and funding was consistently described in terms of the needs and wants of the community. Participants occasionally described seeking the community's input directly into the types of programs they wanted at the Centre. More common was a reliance on the volunteer's knowledge of the community and their skills to deliver a program. Programs were consistently designed in response to a need identified by volunteers or around a volunteer's interests and skills. The time offered by volunteers to run and support programs was a consistent and key message.

Centre 3: *So I'll start off with saying that this place is successful because everyone that works here or volunteers here is willing to put huge amounts of extra time in; the paid staff go way beyond their paid hours. When you look at those displays and all the things I know that that went way out of your paid hours; they won't tell you that, but as a volunteer I know when it's the right people in the right job.*

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Absolutely. Excellent ideas, imaginations and skills to back them up, skills to back it up.

The right tutors... Like for instance, (anonymised individual)... does a woodworking class, but he's also gone and upskilled to do the resin art class; so he does that out of normal hours because it's become such a popular class for people to be in.

Centre 7: *The community centre used to be one of my students I worked in childcare. So, we are a little community with lots of people know each other, but in my work in the childcare centre, I became very aware, aware of how there were lonely people at all ages because people don't have, often have family. And sometimes if you're, even with young children if you're stuck away at home a lot, it's very important that you have somebody to talk to and somebody to listen to you because that's how sometimes you get your own ideas and you know what's important.*

Centre 9: *I'd like to say that I think volunteers are a part of the life of this service and that there's definite cross over between participants and volunteers because as participants come along they want to be involved in the centre and then they might have an idea and then that rolls into then creating spaces for that too. So that, I like how there's that cross over, there's no (anonymised centre name) without the volunteers but also that sometimes they can come from places of participants and there's a really nice blend across, in the programmes.*

Wasn't there someone of the participants who wanted to be a volunteer, although I guess because the roles are kind of blurred if you consider a volunteer as the one who fills in the form and gets officially the volunteer status, then maybe.

Centre 10: *I think one of the really important things about the community centre is that people that come and volunteer have probably been in the same position as the people coming in the door. And so they understand and they've benefited from like the social stuff, the connections and that themselves, that they want other people to do that too.*

Centre 11: *An example of that is a lady came in and had a chat to Sonia my co-worker, and she was knitting socks for people that suicide in hospital, you know quite left of field, but the impact that she was having, and a group of people were having on people that attempted suicide was phenomenal. Now because they didn't have anything, quite often those people in hospital didn't have those social connections, ... bloody lonely, that's why they suicided, and so for someone to come in and give them a knitted pair of slippers or socks, whatever they are, was phenomenal. Now this lady just came in and said, how can we do it at the centre? And now what is happening is that we're saying absolutely, and don't know how many people we'll get, but let's give it a try, so you know as it's turned out, she's now coming on as a volunteer and it's going to be a volunteer led program,*

That program is now due to start, and you know I was thinking quietly, I don't think this is going to work, I don't think there's a need. Well bugger me, we have, the word's got out and people are ringing up before it's been advertised, you know so what do I know. And I think, I keep coming back to I can think I know but I actually bloody don't, and I think that's the beauty of working in community and being able to be flexible and say we'll give it a shot, we'll give it a go.

The effect of developing programs in this way is that many of the Centres had large numbers of volunteers. Volunteers were often involved in the programs and the line between participants and volunteers was not always clear. Some centre coordinators described their volunteering programs as the most important program in the centre. Volunteers often described the purpose for being involved in the programs was to address their own loneliness or needs for connection. Some centres brought in or hired out their space to community services or other community groups. However, this was often described as a source of income for the centre or an avenue to refer people who needed more acute services or support.



2 GETTING STARTED

When asked about their successful programs and projects, participants in the focus groups discussed a range of strategies and experiences that they thought were important to attract members of the community. As in the case of the planning component of successful programs, these strategies were closely tied to the needs of the local context. However, when it came to the experiences of participants upon arrival to the centre there were important consistent themes. Participants constantly referred to three important factors for getting people involved in their programs:

- 1 Being visible
- 2 Safety and welcome
- 3 Conduits

Being visible

The local community's awareness of the Community Centre and its programs was a consistent point of conversation in the focus groups. A range of strategies were used by centres to build the profile of the centre in the community. Some centres had sufficient financial resources to run

mainstream media campaigns. Other centres utilised social media, fliers and posters. Still other centres relied on word of mouth from existing attendees.

The strategies employed by Centres were designed in response to the needs and resources of the community. For example, regional communities emphasised the importance of digital media to communicate over physical distance, while some urban communities, particularly in low socioeconomic areas relied on word of mouth. In either case, the consistent approach was to identify the target group for the program and tailor the method to suit them. It was well understood by centres which methods were unlikely to reach their desired cohort, for example cohorts with low IT skills would not respond to social media, and other centres identified the need for more interpersonal approaches to address cultural needs.

Centre 5: *We advertise in 15 media streams, so we've got our digital sign out the front of the building, media/radio; we just recently created a commercial to go on Channel 9 that's been running for three months or more.*

Centre 12: *We've got Facebook and we've got a website and we email out to different services out our programmes, when we have once a term. And then sometimes we do letterbox drops, but a lot of it is word of mouth, especially when we have the markets and stuff. People will come in and as said, we'll give them a brochure when they have the markets on, we always have the brochures and this is what we're doing here. And but as said, it's a small place in a big community of (anonymised location), so and as said people tend to, what I find is people tend to, especially if they don't have*

much money and they're isolated, don't tend to go far outside of their general area. Other people who are a bit more confident or have a car, a lot of people don't have a car, so we've got the bus stop out the front so people can get here. But sort of if, because (anonymised location) is another community centre.

Centre 9: *Yeah, it's often word of mouth. We have a newsletter as well so sometimes people may be told about it through another service or another connection point. But lots of it is word of mouth.*

In the first excerpt the centre was located in regional area and the centre had a distinct business model that strategically developed their financial resources to meet the challenges of a regional area. In contrast, the second excerpt came from a centre in a low socio-economic area with a higher population density. As new forms of media and communication are introduced to the centre, the temptation to rapidly adopt and switch strategies can become a burden for volunteer dependant centres. The findings from this project suggest that while new forms of communication might present new opportunities for connection, they need to be carefully considered if they would provide better access to the target group.

Welcome

In addition to the profile of the Centre in the local community, one of the most consistent messages from participants was the importance of creating a physically and socially welcoming and safe space in the Centre. Participants emphasised the significance of having staff and volunteers greeting people on arrival. Practices such as remembering people's names, introducing new people and providing a tour of the facility and activities were all discussed.

Centre 7: *Well the fact that the girl who runs (anonymised centre), is absolutely lovely, she's a very friendly girl and she remembers your name, which I think is a really important trait in people to remember who they've met.*



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Centre 2: *Because ... a people puller. She's got a real happy vibe, a real energetic vibe, and she's very sensitive to people, so she will give them every bit of happiness, but if she sees that there's something that's unhappy, she'll always pull them apart – pull them aside – and she pulls them apart too – no she doesn't – pulls them aside and gives them that extra time, or even just that little bit of extra attention without saying a word, just so that they feel special. And I've seen you do it, so that's- ... (Talking over each other) you do a fantastic job of it. It's about the nature of the volunteers.*

I think the key words that is coming to me when people there was talking, and the manager is talking, is about the flexibility, and happiness, they are not judgemental, they're not racist, and approach and respect

Centre 4: *She said I've found it really difficult to come in the door the first few times. So now, we actually stand at the door and greet people by name and it's made a huge difference. You don't realise how much loneliness there is in the community.*

Centre 9: *Okay so in the front of house we have one person who is I guess the MC or host and they, their role is to make announcements to say Grace. But they are very intentional in going around to every table and speaking to people and they're, the person who usually does it has got a very real empathy and can pick up and when people have got particular problems or issues. And that, she's able to bring that back into (anonymised location) and I think we've been able to actually direct people to really specific help for their needs because of the conversations that started in that space. So there are volunteers that do the serving of the meals and all of that but we, there's always at least one person and then quite often (anonymised location), that are*

there having these conversations and just making sure that everybody is comfortable and if there are issues they try and deal with it. Sometimes there's been an issue, something comes up there and they'll take them to one side and have a one-on-one conversation with them away from the group, away from the rest of the participants. So there's those opportunities to really speak into people's situations.

Centre 13: *It's our centre culture I think and being here and being around people, living it and breathing it every day so role modelling behaviours it is a great way for people to see how to act and it kind of is catchy.*

And there is a feeling that comes over a group when it's working, so when you are doing something in a group there is a feeling that comes over it where everyone is engaged; no one feels like they have to talk but they can talk if they want to. The facilitators don't feel stressed and they are not being pushed to ...

Centre 10: *it's such a welcome place, you know, you just feel good when you walk in the door and everybody's so welcoming and friendly and you do, you feel safe.*

I was going to say I just think it's a fun place too. Like when we say like it's welcoming and friendly, it's also fun, like you can have a bit of a muck around as well. It's not all business.

Centre 11: *And I think it also comes on, completely agree with what you're saying here, and I think it also comes from the minute people walk in the door, the whole, the culture of this centre is very welcoming.*

Friendly, no pressure, you know people ..., I think if you provide the environment within the programs that means you've got to have good leaders supported by the environment all around the program. When they walk to the



kitchen and have a cup of coffee, somebody will walk past and nod and smile, you know I think that all counts.

It's having a space, and thankfully we do have a space now at the centre, in our foyer as well, as well as our garden, that people can go after a program finishes.

In these excerpts many participants referred to individuals and the culture of a centre as well as practices that welcome visitors and regulars to the centres. Interpersonal skills and practices of staff and volunteers who greet people as they arrive, provide information, introductions and remember names help people feel welcome. These practices are underpinned by values such as being respectful, non-judgemental attitudes and availability. In addition to these general principles, there were also specific practices employed to foster initial connection and conversation.

Centre 5: *So through these calls one of our volunteers highlighted a list of conversation starters, so we had gardening, we had – and I personally found it invaluable with my own mother because I was in the same boat that I'd talk to Mum for five minutes and then it was like okay, there's this awkward silence of nothing to talk about anymore. And so we used it and it worked really, really well and then they then in turn said all of those conversation starters we then used with our families and it prolonged those connections with families.*

Centre 1: *We also have homeless people come here and they'll come here and we'll make them something to eat and we'll let them charge their phone and we'll give them a cup of coffee. Some of them have dogs, so we'll give the dogs some food and some water and you know, create a connection like that.*

Centre 12: *And that's why we always provide some water out the front for people that have got pets and things and it's another sort of thing to make them feel comfortable when they come in and they can, Lesley who is in ... grow, she brings her little dog and sits on the couch there with her little dog out the back, little chihuahua and she's part of the family.*

The principles and values, as well as the notion of having practices for initiating conversation, are long established in social and community work. Yet these points are important to highlight here as a crucial finding, as the participants placed a high emphasis on this factor in addressing loneliness and creating social connection. Furthermore, this finding suggests that individuals within the centre who are focused on these practices are conduits to people overcoming loneliness and building social connection. In a similar way to the findings presented above, these conduits are less tied to the content or activities of a program, but rather are part of a holistic picture and range of



unstructured activities that surround structured programs and give shape to the overall experience of the Centre.

Physical spaces

In addition to the practices and values of individuals, participants in the focus groups often discussed the importance of physical spaces that were welcoming and created opportunities for connection.

Centre 1: *So we've now created a building that is full of colour and warmth, so that when somebody walks in it feels good. And people, new people that are coming in say that all the time, oh it's such a nice centre, it feels so nice. So it feels safe, it feels secure, it feels, it's not intimidating. We work a lot on our culture around greeting people, making people feel welcome.*

Centre 4: *And there's usually, we usually try and either do – have some morning tea or afternoon tea. The community shed, for example, the working shed, they stop for morning tea. With our volunteering, we stop for morning tea. So there's always that element built into most things that we do.*

AHH, the coffee van and ... So that's one of the bumping, the main bumping space I think that we have here.

Centre 6: *Yeah, so they ... about firstly is the gate, it's a ... Vietnamese culture so yeah, it's easy to recognise. And when they came here it's easy to access because there's no stair to... And for those who cannot drive we can pick up them and I think that ... really want to come here and because ... has many activity for them you know, not just about social life, but the game help their brain work you know, ... every day. And they think that if we do the group every day they think they would come every day because they really want to.*

Centre 13: *A bit of a lifestyle centre, so our foyer is a real little, like a community room. So people can just ideally come, chat, meet people, have a cuppa and it is really those that do struggle with feelings of loneliness and isolation that we do have pop into the centre every day. They might sit under a tree, we've got a beautiful like community garden, and our front – our car park and the surrounding gardens around there are set out as such that small groups can kind of sit out there and there is shade provided – a beautiful like table with disability access that's used quite regularly.*

Centre 10: *there is an open space with couches in the – like when you walk in the door and the front office is – I mean, it's an office, but it's open on both sides*

It's nice and bright and airy, lots of like coming in. And I've got the most wonderful quilt there that is just – makes it feel like home all the time and there's a quilt which is probably about 3 metres by 3 metres-

Yeah, and depicts community, what community's all about, and it's – and it just makes the place, you know, it puts colour in. Like before the building was very warm, the colours were very warm, and when we had this – the building redone and everything was white and we all walked in and it was stark and it's like how do we get this back? But putting up the quilt, filling it with stuff like information, you know, a bit of colour in there, some paintings that we've done, and put all those around, and that brings it back to life type thing.

Centre 11: *So look I don't think this centre has got anything extremely different to any other centre, I think it's just the use of space, and you know it is all about that place making stuff for me, and making that first area that you walk into really, you know bright, welcoming.*

And we've also got, which is a big feature of the centre, a big garden

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area that is just gorgeous, you know with play equipment, you know a big table and chairs, table and benches that people can sit around, and you know we have been known to have meetings out there when we don't have a room.

You know we repainted, we rebadged, we made what little foyer area we have into a place where people can sit, so we've got a, you know a couple of little coffee tables, a little couch, and just an area where people can sit inside.

There were consistent features of physical entry spaces of the centres that the participants identified as being welcoming. These included culturally significant signs, food and artwork, spaces and ascetics that provided a sense of comfort and opportunities to relax, as well as furniture that encouraged opportunities for meeting and being with others. These spaces were often indoors, however, regularly centres described outdoor spaces that likewise contained these key features. The spaces seemed to indicate the purpose of the centre as a place for connection where meeting and talking within others was prioritised. These were spaces where those attending programs might 'bump' into each other and have a casual conversation that was not centred around the content of a program.

Safety

The other essential characterises of successful Centres was a feeling of safety. Participants did not always have the words to articulate why or how they felt safe, but the feeling was critical. It was this feeling of safety that enabled people to connect, or at least when people did connect it was understood that it was because they felt safe to.

Centre 12: *Caring for the community, because that's what every single group does.*

It doesn't matter whether I'm going to group on a Saturday morning, I'll help with her groups during the week to prepare some of her groups. I think it's a matter of interaction with the community. It's like I say yeah.

And you know it doesn't matter whether you're young or old or from a different background or whatever, everyone feels-

Welcome.

Comfortable, safe and-

Definitely safe ...

It doesn't matter, there's no barriers, we don't have, as I said especially barriers like money and stuff isn't a barrier here.

No judgement.

Because that means you're going somewhere that's really safe.

Centre 10: *I think that safety stuff is really important, about creating a safe space where we're in the centre because that sets up the friendship, you know, that sort of is a base for the friendship. And people knowing that we won't put up with bad staff as well,*

Centre 1: *It's a safe place for you to come. And when we do projects with our children we did a project where they with clay made a community centre and on that they wrote what the community centre means to them. And one of the recurring themes across that was it was safe and it was friendly.*

It's a relatively small group. We have a maximum of 10, sometimes stretching to 12 people purely from ..., but from the interaction point of view as well if it gets too big they won't talk. Deliberately keep it small to get the interactions happening. It originally commenced and I think (anonymised location) was one of the people who initially started it as a much more artistic.

They do bring their own, gradually they build up their own little kit which has got scissors and things like that in it and colouring pencils or colouring Textas or whatever they want. So the group itself initially when somebody new starts in the group you can feel the quietness develop in the room. It gets relatively quiet for that first week while everybody susses

everybody out. After that it tends to become a lot more open and the ladies will actually say things that you wouldn't expect them to say even public, semi-public forum. But we've actually said to them that whatever is said in that room stays in that room; it doesn't go out.

Centre 13: *So we were approached by a local artist who does weaving and has permission to teach weaving by the Ngarrindjeri people where, and she comes – she came to us and offered to teach weaving with the women here, and teach the stories that come along with it, and we provided a space that was safe and inclusive and very kind I suppose, for lack of a better word, where women could come and we would weave, and sometimes women come and talk, and express how they are feeling, and sometimes they just sit and listen, and just are there, and we've had participants say to us that it's the one time of the week that they stop. It's also the one time of the week that that they can just be themselves and if that means they are having a bad day then they are having a bad day, and it's the one place they can be supported and instrumental in that climate that she creates in that group,*

Centre 13: *One participant said it's the only time of the week that she can be herself without people judging. So we take note of those comments, but there's also people who come too that have come with a mental health sort of support, and you hear those people say we haven't been able to get this person out of the house for a week, and she wanted to come here today, we can see that as a success because she wanted to be there, but the other thing that I do hear is I do art with a gentleman who has a disability and we do finger painting and we put music on, and he paints away, and when the carers say to you that's the first time I have ever heard him sing and see him laugh that's the right thing.*

The importance of a feeling of safety is highlighted in these excerpts in terms of both individual programs and the whole centre. The time it takes to develop safety in a group as described in these excerpts is well documented in sociological and psychology literature. In this context it becomes clear that safety is continuously built and negotiated. Safety can be a feature of the culture of the centre. Importantly safety is also created or dismantled by groups within the centre. An experience of safety is built and rebuilt with each new visitor to the centre.

In Between and Beyond

In the planning section above, some Centres described addressing loneliness and building social connection was a by-product of the activities they ran. Other Centres set out to explicitly address loneliness, yet they often chose similar styles and methods of programs. When probed further about when and where the connections were happening, a clearer pattern emerged. The formal and structured component of the programs was important. However, equally important were the spaces around and after the program. The spaces ‘in between’ programs where people would gather to wait for a program to begin or continue a conversation after where connection spontaneously occurred or deepened. Likewise, connections took place ‘beyond’ the Centre in the community, homes and local businesses after a program. The formal program was an initiating component, but it was in these spaces and at these times where social connection was observed. Furthermore, the witnessing of these connections in between and beyond the centre were important indicators that the programs were successful.

In between:

CENTRE 7: *So that’s why I went the Tai chi and it was just nice to be able to go out and you meet other people, before when you get to the classes other people waiting there before the class starts. So you’re able to stand around and chat and, and then*

if you’re out and about with shopping and that, and you bump into these people you’re there and you’re chatting again. So you’re getting that extra comfort in that knowledge,

Centre 9: *Well and I’m thinking in that I’m thinking, when I talk about this I’m thinking in relation to (anonymised location) and a number of participants in that space then leave and go and have coffee or lunch together following that. So at the café at the centre, they’ll go over to the church and have coffee together and another chat and lunch, which is great.*

Centre 10: *About – I think about before COVID from the kitchen perspective, you know, everyone’d get together in the kitchen and stuff like that and having that closed off, you know, like you actually recognise that that’s that opportunity to sit down and just chat. And we do the same with students in the ACE as well, you know, like they’d go get a cup of coffee and a couple people would start talking to each other, it was a way of connecting through actually just getting a coffee and a tea.*

Well, it is, it’d be tea or coffee or the smokers’ corner is the two places. You just – when we do the longer programs, if they come for 3 hours we put quite a big break in there to start with because it’s just a chance for everyone to start connecting with each other, hey. That’s for them to learn effectively the need to be making those connections.

I find that a lot of times, if you’re in a class like that you can see there might be something going on with a person, you know, and you get a bit of a sense of it and it’s that opportunity to kind of connect and I’ve one, and I’m still kind of supporting the person at the moment, is we went out and had a smoke and the two other mates with them going do you know anyone who can help? Like she’s desperately trying to find housing.

In these excerpts participants describe the interaction that happen around the edges of a program while the participants are waiting for them to begin, as they are moving from one program/activity to another or during a program but in a space away for the official activity. These in between spaces are opportunities for unstructured interactions and connections where people appear to take a conversation beyond the content of the activity and begin to share their personal lives.

Beyond:

Centre 3: *And – and I’m – it was interesting one of the men said to me last Wednesday, have you noticed that the men don’t want to go home anymore? They want to – they’re supposed to finish at 10:00. But they’re hanging around and there were some women chat, chat, chat, chat, chat... it’s just anecdotally. But that it does set up networks of people that becomes social networks outside of the centre ...People go out for lunch and things – things like that*

CENTRE 7: *I think the coffee part of it is very important to be made available so that if people do want to stop and chat, and get to know somebody. I’m still finding, I think probably because I’ve taken 2 friends myself, so I don’t need to find someone else.*

Well I’d say definitely the, the coffee and chat afterwards, makes, makes the session.

CENTRE 8: *So and a few of them connect outside. (anonymised individual)’s been a part of that group and you’ve made friendships in that group-*

Yes, absolutely.

That you continue to ... (Talking over each other).

Yeah, very firm friends, yeah.

So it’s not just about being here. It’s about you know, those relationships go beyond ...

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And something that a woman said ... one of the benefits was that when she went to the local shops she doesn't know every, but like familiar faces; people that she's seen here. So it's like it's not this deep relationship, but it's a sense of belonging.

Centre 1: *Which is quite cute, but it's actually, it says that we've still got a way to work on them yet to get them to feel comfortable to go to their lunch without their support person. A group of them, about four or five of them still meet with a couple of people who used to come to the group and they go down to ... and have lunch once a week, once a fortnight. So they've made friendships outside of the group and they extend that to the outside.*

Centre 6: *Yes, and sometime here we organise so that they not in here, but they go to the restaurant together and ... together, yeah. And they share ... in their home they plant some tree and vegetable and they share with each other ... they do it them self at home,*

Centre 9: *It's a social group where people come along and have coffee together and conversation and it started with just one person having a cuppa in the community garden and evolved from there to more and more people coming along. And it's at the point now where we even go on excursions and as I said, there's a lot of that friendships within the group that carry out into outer, outside of the centre.*

Centre 11: *And while the COVID's been on and while we closed down over Christmas, I have 9 people, 10 including me for lunch, and we have lunch, they bring a plate and we have lunch. And I go through the 50 people so that somebody always gets an invite every Tuesday, that fills their time up of a Tuesday, because they're missing the contact being here where they're singing, and that's been going on for 3 years now ... through*

COVID, 3 years ago, there was a need, where the people were reaching out and saying how much they missed the contact, and as I was saying while it was 10, we'd have, I have a humongous apple tree, so it'd be that, under the apple tree we'd be singing or, and the neighbours would be clapping.

On the surface the notion that participants are connecting beyond the program would seem to be a logical outcome of facilitating programs to address loneliness and build social connection. However, in these excerpts the participants spoke about these connections as something that requires intentional work, was different or distinct from the formal program, but also what 'makes the session'.

This finding recenters the purpose of programs facilitated by community centres is not simply to build connection into the program, or to attract people to the program then measure its successfulness by attendance. Instead, the purpose is to create opportunities for meaningful and sustainable connections beyond the centre. Furthermore, with this orientation, the formal programs are primarily an avenue to encourage the building of connections and recognising that sustainable connection requires the continuation of the formal into the informal outside of the program. In other words, programs and initiatives need to build into their planning strategies that encourage and support connections beyond the centre.

Success:

Centre 1: *My program would be, a way of evaluating it in any way, shape or form would be around the participation factor. As you watch people go from being quiet on the end of the table deliberately choosing a corner position and then you watch them as they become more comfortable and more at home in the program they change where they sit in the room and they become part of the middle of the room and they also start to take part in discussions.*

It goes on all the time and we're not always aware. I think the group of the reception volunteers that go and have coffee, I think that had been running for about six months before I actually knew it was happening. And I think that's because it's outside of the centre so people don't feel that it's relevant-

Centre 9: *I would suggest it's happened in other groups. So anecdotally I've heard people mention in the Women Together group that they have caught up in other spaces and on the weekends. There's been mention of text messages and can you pick me up for this thing later in the week. So yes definitely friendships have evolved out of the groups.*

Centre 9: *That's, it's a drop in group really but it's about connecting every week, having a cuppa, having a chat and making friendships and it's an interesting space because it's a space that has not only grown within the group, but we're also seeing those interactions head outside of the weekly space as well, which is really nice. But so it originally started with some people sitting in our community garden area, having a cuppa and starting to have a chat and then it rolled on to a weekly meet up and more and more people started to attend ...*

Centre 13: *That it was really important for us that people connected outside of the group which was a really key part of what we wanted it to be because while we live in a small town we don't know everyone, and that was the key part of it – that we had people coming from all walks of life that*

when they saw each other at the shop they would say “Oh hey how are you going”? And that was a really important part of it, and the other facilitator and I are always going well hey, you know making sure we would connect those people outside of here is important.

So when I spoke to one of the participants – this person she saw grocery shopping all the time, and she said I had never actually realised who she was before, so now when they see each other they say hello. So it’s just that general knowing someone by their face and saying how you going?

Centre 10: *I think the measure for me – and I actually see it with the Women’s Group as well – is the friendship outside of the centre. So it’s not just about what occurs in, it’s actually the friendships that are made outside. That Women’s Group through social media are incredibly supportive of each other every day. You know, it’s not just when they’re in the centre. And that happens with ... groups as well, that social connection and friendships that they make.*

Centre 11: *Yeah so the friendships that are formed within the groups. You know I’ve witnessed some amazing friendships ... (anonymised individual), is a single lady, has got a daughter who has got significant mental health issues, is living in supported accommodation in Adelaide, she self-harms, she has personality disorders, she has tried to suicide a number of times. And you know this woman is dealing with this every single day, you know lives locally, drives into the city almost every day because there’s an issue with her adult daughter that needs support. And you know I guess the structure that’s been built around her with the ladies together group, the friendships that have been formed have honestly almost saved that lady, because she was not in a good place 12-18 months ago.*

In these excerpts the participants talk about ‘anecdotal’ stories of people meeting up outside the centre. This evidence is seen as ‘important’ and ‘really nice’ indicators and in one case it is ‘the measure’ that the centres is creating meaningful connections. The participating centres did not describe a formal process for measuring and capturing the occurrence of these outside connections. Yet, stories of these connections happening and the meaning and impact these connections had on people’s lives were a regular and important feature of the focus groups. It was these stories that seemed to bring meaning or indicate success of the programs to the participants in the focus groups. Future planning for strategies to address loneliness and build social connection would benefit from establishing a method to systemically collect these stories as evidence of the successfulness of community centres.

The role of champions

An important minor theme that was not explicitly asked of participants but that was identified in the data was the role of individuals to take a lead or key role in the planning or execution of initiatives in the centres. As outlines across the excerpts provided above, participants often identified an individual, often a volunteer, who identified an issue or brought a particular skill set around which a

program was designed. Alternatively, an individual was identified as being particularly skilled and valued by participants for their ability to make others feel welcome, join a group and connect with others. Some of these individuals provided or organised opportunities outside of the official program such as coffee or lunch meet ups. These people might also have formal roles (volunteer or paid) in the management of the centre. Rather than being overlooked as valuable but incidental praise, this pattern might reflect the importance of identifying, celebrating and empowering people to take on roles in that align to their skillset and passion. Furthermore, though this may not be present in the data, this likely reflects the necessity of personal contributions for the ongoing maintenance and success of community centres.



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Research Question:

What evidence of increased connectedness do the community centres already collect?

Community centres described a range of data that they are already required to collect. Not all of this data was seen as directly relating to loneliness and social connection. For the most part this data collection was related to reporting requirements for funded programs that may have had a social connection by-product but were not understood as being explicitly for this purpose. These programs included government funded programs such as Adult Community Education that required attendance and demographic data. Other centres created their own data collection methods reflecting a customer management approach. There were a small number of centres that described using loneliness specific data collection tools.

Centre 3: *That – that’s all part of – part of the report that ... got to Department of Innovation and Skills if they leave, or ... studies, if they leave for work. We have to do an assessment - a universal assessment of needs. Which was introduced last year. It was a very, very cumbersome tool. This year it’s all on digital. So it’s the measurement of where – basically it’s their skills from where they start, to where they end. So all the students at – in literacy will have to do that at the start. And then we will do another one whenever ... that tool in – in due – due course...*

Centre 5: *The difficulty for us is because we have five Federal and State grants and so the administrative burden of that is horrendous. So if Trudy’s saying they have goals, so for the Commonwealth Home Support Program our funding requires us to report on goals restorative ..., communities for children we report on something different, CSSP we report something different; so we have three forms with the criteria that each government department what their outcomes are and then we have to evidence all of those outcomes to meet whatever that government requirement is.*

Centre 12: *We, obviously we get funding from DHS and DSS and we’re having ACE funding, so you’ve got to meet a lot of their criteria. Those grants come with ... a set amount of people from refugee backgrounds, a certain amount of people from indigenous background. There’s so much criteria around what you need to be addressing these thing.*

So we use the survey method. We’ve a survey that’s opening in November actually. So all the clients for a week fill in the survey and then that’s based on, I don’t know what it’s called now, it’s that survey that’s put out by DHS and it measures loneliness on the loneliness scale and it has a measure for other things in there as well. And so we use that to measure what’s happening. I mean I see all the different groups and I can sort of see what’s happening, basically be able to see what’s happening and what the trends are.

Centre 4: *Mine’s slightly different because the parameters are set by DHS. I get a pre-service assessment that we do with a participant and then a post-service assessment. And I can measure – and it’s against the AQUAL 6 tool and the Campaign to End Loneliness measure tool.*

In a more formal way, we do surveys twice of year, from – put out by the Department of Human Services, which actually uses the loneliness scale tool as well. It talks about whether you have people that you can ask for assistance, whether you do feel lonely, whether you have friendships, that sort of thing. So that’s the formal measure that we use a couple of times a year, for everybody that comes into the centre.

Gathering Evidence

Centre 2: *I don't care for attendance lists or a department within an organisation that's just doing it for an agenda, it's not what we're about. In regards to attendance, most if not all of the programs have attendance. I mean we definitely do it for ones that have funding requirements ... attached to them. So we have a ballpark figure, but nothing more – yeah, I think 90 percent of them we do give attendance, because people want to know the numbers, the demographics of the group that are coming through.*

Data collection and reporting was routinely described as a 'administrative burden' and 'cumbersome'. For many of these centres this data did not reflect a meaningful measure of the value of their work and in the case of the final excerpt, the result of this mismatch was a process of estimating the data. In cases where the centre utilised a loneliness specific tool, this was referred to as the 'formal' method of assessing their work, implying that there were other less formal processes that they equally valued (or valued more). Some centres went on to name the kinds of indicators that they believed evidenced the success of their programs.

CENTRE 7: *I think the fact that you keep going back and you see the same people there all the time and they're keeping, obviously coming back ... it's working really well.*

I was just going to say, just reinforce what the last speaker said, and if you've got people are who consistently, consistently going back and you've got new people coming, that's some, something else you have to add it sometimes, you had to adjust, offer something new but still support people who are, who are new, but still offer challenges.

Centre 12: *Well I can, in my group it's just the smiles on the faces when they attend this programme and the fact that bang on they're there at nine o'clock, meaning they're looking forward to coming*

.... They've been doing it, I mean that's their outing... and that's the happiness, and also the achievements.

Centre 10: *... and there was one fella in there who used to come to one of our programs, would come in, go to the leadlighting class, do his thing, wouldn't bother talking to anybody, nothing. You know, just come in, pack your stuff up, and leave without saying anything to anybody. And that ... because we had the veterans here, he actually went to the ceremony, connected with the veterans, and now he's doing lots of things. He even got married. He is actually – I think he's secretary of the veterans. So he's doing lots of other stuff ... I'll tell you about one of the fellas which is a good for instance one. So this fella who had been coming into the centre and then joined the veterans, he actually did a speech at one of the special events we had and said that he was taking less PTSD medication and that just being part of all this has changed his life. And that, you know, just ... known that he was actually part of*

community. Well, not any particular measures, but, yeah, but we will talk about the success of it and if there's then connections, that's, you know, that is the success.

As outlined in the previous section, these informal measures were not systematically recorded by the centres. While these outcomes are popularly perceived as 'anecdotal' evidence, if they were recorded through an established and rigorous process, they could form an important and scientifically valid source of evidence. This data doesn't translate easily into the often-quantitative measures required by funding bodies (such as attendance, demographic data and scale-based measures), however, they likely better reflect the social nature of the phenomenon of loneliness and social connection.



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Research Question: How do these existing practices compare to the literature on promoting meaningful social connection?

There is a plethora of research into how community centres are well placed to reduce the ever-growing endemic into social isolation and loneliness (Bagnall et al., 2018; Cortis & Blaxland, 2020; Flood, 2005; Holdsworth & Hartman, 2009; O'Neil et al., 2013; World Health Organization, 2021; Ziersch & Arthurson, 2007). In the UK alleviating social isolation and loneliness has become a major social issue, with forty-five percent of adults stating they feel lonely intermittently, sometimes or regularly. It is predicted by 2025 two million people aged over fifty will experience loneliness (Age UK, 2020) Australia is no exception.

The AIHW (2021) report into Social Isolation and Loneliness, stated that 33% of Australians will experience loneliness sometime during their lifetime (Relationships Australia, 2018). Since the onset of COVID 19 over 50% of respondents in surveys undertaken during social distancing regulations and consecutive lockdowns throughout Australia, reported that they have felt lonelier (Lim et al 2020).

Community environments provide opportunities to encourage and support sociality (Mann et al., 2017), to construct connectivity (Kennedy, Vassilev, James, & Rogers, 2015), and nurture community capital (Marmot & Allen, 2020). How research and evaluation is transferred into practice has been described to as a leaky pipeline (Green & Ottoson, 2004), as important findings are not transmitted. When transferring research into practice understanding the context of when, how and type of programs are delivered is essential (Green & Ottoson, 2004; Greenhalgh et al., 2017). Service delivery is dependent on organisational culture, social, economic, political, and legal environments (Peters & Besley, 2014). Research has shown that all these or only some environmental factors have an impact, whether inhibiting or promoting implementation of programs (Pfadenhauer et al., 2017).

In community centres, context is vital to understanding how facilitators and participants engage with programs promoting social connection and networks (Brook & McGraw, 2018). Payne, Haith-Cooper, and Almas (2021) found that when community centres are aware of community needs and welcoming, they have more community involvement. This research project differs from many others undertaken in South Australia and Australia in two important ways. First, this research prioritises the voice to those who are on the frontline (i.e., staff and volunteers) when examining what works. Secondly, this project takes bottom-up approach to data collection beginning with the knowledge and experience of participants, rather than imposing definitions and established frameworks for key ideas including social isolation and loneliness.

Social isolation, loneliness and social connection

Social isolation and loneliness are terms that are often used interchangeably, and although the concepts are correlated, there are important distinctions between the two. Social isolation is often seen as an absence of meaningful and continuous relationships in an individual's life (Altschul, Iveson, & Deary, 2021; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021; Fine & Spencer, 2009; World Health Organization, 2021). Loneliness is more subjective and is indicated by the way a person perceives and experiences the lack of social communication in their daily lives (Altschul et al., 2021; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021; Kung, Kunz, & Shields, 2021, p. 1; World Health Organization, 2021). Social connection is arguable more complex involving "structural, functional, and qualitative aspects of social relationships" (Holt-Lunstad, Robles, & Sbarra, 2017, p. 518; World Health Organization, 2021).

Comparing to existing Literature

Social isolation and loneliness have significant negative consequences among older individuals (Nicholson 2012) and there is increasing recognition on other sections of society (Victor & Yang, 2012). These affects include, but not isolated to mental and physical health outcomes and quality of life. Recent research has further explored some of the important characteristics that distinguish social isolation and loneliness, such as social isolation impacts mortality in older persons, while loneliness affects the emotional experience of being alone (Dickens et al., 2011; Poscia et al., 2018; Steptoe, Shankar, Demakakos, & Wardle, 2013).

As outlined above, the community centres in this research utilised a mix of intentional and responsive planning strategies to address social isolation and loneliness. Social isolation, loneliness and social connection were concepts that the participants used regularly, but in many cases participants didn't have a working definition or regular intentional conversations about these ideas. As the literature suggest, these ideas are often used interchangeably. Developing a greater awareness among staff and volunteers of the similarities and differences between these concepts might improve strategic planning processes. More importantly greater understanding of the similarities and differences would likely help in documenting and evidencing the value of the existing work being done in community centres through both embedding evaluation during the planning stage as well as helping staff and volunteers to identify ad-hoc instances of impact.

Loneliness and social isolation are popularly understood to be issues experienced by older people and the research has to a degree reflected this focus (Child & Lawton, 2019). However, recent research is showing that older people are not alone in this experience (Victor & Yang, 2012). In the UK figures released by the Office for National

Statistics in April 2018 showed that the groups were most at risk of loneliness and social isolation were widowed older homeowners and unmarried middle-aged people with chronic health conditions and younger renters with few social networks within their community (Pyle & Evans, 2018). Similar data gathered in Australia also found young people were more at risk of loneliness than previously thought. However, research on younger people has been very limited despite the experience being unique to each population group (Child & Lawton, 2019).

In 2019, Vic Health surveyed over 1500 young people (12-25 years old) to determine how common experiences of social isolation and loneliness were in this age group and to investigate the connection with mental health issues. This research showed that feelings of loneliness were regularly experienced among adolescents aged between 12-17, but more frequently faced by young adults between 18-25 years of age, affecting physical and mental health outcomes. There was a gender pattern in the 18–25-year-old cohort experience of loneliness, social anxiety, and depression, with more women reporting these feelings than men (Lim, Eres, & Peck, 2019). This pattern could be attributed to the reluctance of young adult males to disclose feeling lonely or social isolated. Research has found that more males aged between 18-29 felt lonelier than women of the same age cohort (Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2014). This report found that there was a distinct lack of programs specifically aimed and initiated for this age group.

The programs and initiatives run by participants in this research project were predominantly aimed at the older age group popularly perceived as being vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness. There were program run at some centres for young parents, children's playgroups, English language and school homework groups as well as a rare program that focussed on CALD or LGBTIQ+ young people. As outlined above, one of the

most important initiatives run by community centres was the volunteer program itself. Sixty-seven percent of volunteers and staff participating in this project were over the age of 45 years, and twenty-six percent over the age of 60 years. Volunteers were a central source of ideas and labour for programs. As such it is unsurprising that programs tended to be tailored towards this age cohort. An important starting point for expanding the target group of community centres initiatives would be to seek to develop a more diverse volunteer cohort which would also contribute to ensuring the sustainability of the centres (given the dependence on volunteers) in the long run.

Interventions and initiatives

How to tackle loneliness and social isolation broadly has been well researched. There has been studies emphasising personal growth and the reframing of their lived experiences of solitude to inhibit loneliness (Hooper 2013). Other studies have shown when people perceive themselves as less lonely than others, then their perception of being lonely becomes less negative (Cattan & Ingold, 2003; Cattan, Newell, Bond, & White, 2003). Social support, referring to different kinds of support from others (Ashida & Heaney, 2008) has been under researched. However, in this study it was those providing the social support to others that identified as feeling less lonely. By giving support to others made people feel needed and the emotion of loneliness rescinded (O'Rourke, Collins, & Sidani, 2018). This phenomenon requires further study as community centres offer a gateway for socially isolated or lonely people to reconstruct meaning to their everyday life using a strengths-based approach (Saleebey, 1996). Although research has shown that older population groups (over 65) are more likely to be involved with spaces that target inclusivity, as are families and those aged 18-25, people that lived alone were more likely to engage with these incidental or 'bumping spaces' (Farmer,

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Cotta, Hartung, & et al., 2021, p. 10). Research undertaken by Karg et al. (2021) identified three main issues when looking at infrastructure for social connection in East Melbourne. They were (1) barriers to engagement, (2) needs and interests of person/s, and (3) the need for third spaces, such as cafes, restaurants or specific meeting places whether they are online or face-to-face. This third outcome could involve incidental bumping spaces such as community gardens, Facebook page from a community centre.

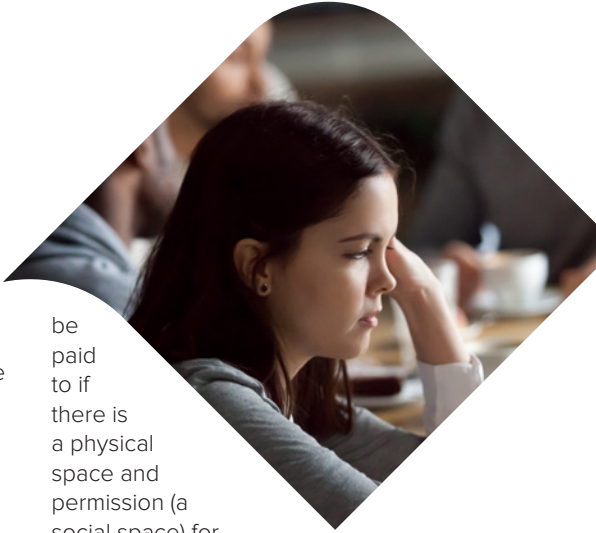
Bumping spaces

“Bumping Spaces” is a term to describe places where people can meet and interact with new people and build connections. They are spaces where members of communities might “literally ‘bump into’ each other” (Farmer et al., 2021, p. 10). These can include “kitchens, art galleries, the local café, even small spaces in parks or corridors at the gym or yoga class, and public artwork” (Farmer et al., 2021, p. 10). Karg et al. (2021, p. 15) describe them in narrower terms as “infrastructure” or “areas designed for people to bump into each other”. They contrast this space to “third spaces” that are locations for informal meetings “in addition to their primary role” (Karg et al., 2021, p. 15). Different again are “ephemeral spaces” that are temporary in their nature and “online and hybrid spaces” provided by technology (social media, gaming and augmented reality) (Karg et al., 2021, p. 16). The design of these spaces has also been a focus of attention with some evidence that “green and blue spaces” (i.e. including garden and water features) can improve social interaction (Bagnall et al., 2018). Then theory surrounding, as well as times, Spatiotemporal theory suggests that “groups, ideology, forces of production and networks of relations” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 77) play an important part in the creation and interaction between social and physical space. Recent research into other social interaction (such as school bullying) suggest that experiences such as “sounds and feelings” (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015, p. 90) in spaces can have long lasting effects (Horton & Kraftl, 2006).

Space created was often part of an existing building or outdoor area not specifically designed for this purpose. Architecture of buildings were also noted as barrier to community engagement, in relation museums or an ‘arts’ building (Karg et al. 2021). However, the cultural, political and geographical specificity of these planning and construction might also be an important consideration relating to community centres in Australia. In the United States university architecture, engineering and interior design students have collaborated with builders and communities to transform community buildings. This process, known as ‘community-based design, participatory design, or public interest design’ (Hicks & Radtke, 2015, p. 158) allows professionals and communities come together to co-create and transform spaces within a community (Angotti, Doble, & Horrigan, 2011; Hicks & Radtke, 2015).

Bumping spaces was a term that was familiar to some participants in the study. As outlined above the concept of a space where people would meet and build connection, though not necessarily called a bumping space, was central to the planning and functioning of many of the centres. The current literature emphasises bumping spaces in physical (and digital) terms. These are “kitchens, art galleries, the local café” that form the infrastructure within which connections are made. This understanding, along with an understanding of the value of “green” and “blue” spaces was already present in the centres. In addition to this the participants described not just the physical spaces, but also the social spaces where connection happened. The social spaces took place within physical spaces, however, social spaces can be (and benefit from) planned in the same way that the physical building of a community centre does.

Participants described connections happening in-between, during and after the program, in a connected way to the program but also separate from it. While this interaction is informal, it can still be planned for. Attention can



be paid to if there is a physical space and permission (a social space) for people to step outside a formal program and find an informal space (like a kitchen). When planning a building for a community space, it might be important to include a communal space that welcomes community members to interact informally. Equally when planning a timetable of weekly programs attention could be paid to the social spaces between the programs that invite participants to keep interacting with the same group or encourage cross over between different groups. A spatiotemporal approach to bumping spaces encourages planning for the social as well as the physical components of bumping spaces.

Social connectors & by-products

Recent research has reinforced the importance of individuals and relationships in building social connection. Farmer et al. (2021, p. 16) argue that ‘community connectors’ play a significant role in the creation of safe spaces where people can make new connections. Community Connectors can be staff or volunteers “whose role it is to connect people, with each other, into groups or services” (Farmer et al., 2021, p. 16). In addition to the emphasis on “infrastructure and a place based approach” (Krag et al. 2020, p. 18) to build connections, these people might be the organisers of activities or simply be available to support people to overcome their shyness or lack of confidence (Farmer et al., 2021, p. 16). Farmer et al. (2021, p. 16) argue the role of these connectors should be thought of as part of the picture on top of a commitment to a foundation of safe and accessible regularly accessed locations (Farmer et al., 2021, p. 11; Francis, Giles-Corti, Wood, & Knuiman, 2012) with bumping spaces and fun purposeful activities (J. Dare, Wilkinson, Marquis, & Donovan, 2018).

The central importance of volunteers is an important finding from this research project. Equally, participants emphasised the importance of welcome and safety in community centres. Farmer et al's (2021) description of 'community connectors' suggest this is ongoing work that begins with welcome and contributes to the ongoing experience of safety. The interpersonal skills of the volunteers and staff in the centres to create an experience of welcome and safety in the centres was an important feature of the focus groups. Similarly, as noted above, there was a pattern of participants identifying and celebrating these individuals in the focus groups. In a similar way to technical language around social isolation, connection and loneliness, there may be value in building on the centres intuitive practice in this space by formally identifying and empowering individual with the role of 'community connector'. Further research is needed to investigate the impact this might have on building connections, and equally on the experience of participants in community centre programs when interacting with an official 'community connector' as compared to a volunteer or staff member who is not officially identified in this role. The concern here is the potential negative impact on sustainable connections by formalising an otherwise informal role. In spite of these concerns, there would likely be value for planning and evaluation to formally identify and resource this role.

In this context, Farmer et al. (2021, p. 16) suggest social connection then happens as a 'by-product'. However, Karg et al. (2021) argued that social connection is often seen as a secondary, or operational by-product of programs, and little time is left to nurture social connection. This is as a result of volunteers being heavily involved with design and service delivery of programs, yet paradoxically

nurturing social connection was seen as more important than the primary product. In contrast, in corporate setting organisations are encouraged to intentionally factor in "time for banter and social chat into start and end of work meetings or having casual team socials" (Farmer, Gaylor, & Lemke, 2020, p. 2). Underpinning the role of social connectors and social connection as a by-product is a well-developed understanding the process of group formation (see for example (Forsyth, 2018)) and dynamics summarised by Farmer et al. (2021, p. 17) as including three important phases. The first phase, "seeking to join" includes experiences of discomfort and uncertainty. The second phase "Getting to Know" involved overcoming the initial emotional discomfort to discover if the group is a good 'fit'. The final stage where participants feel "part of the group" includes an experience of belonging.

Social connection as a "by-product" is shared in both the literature and the participants in this study. Similar to many other findings in this report, there appears to exist a tension between planning and formalising this aspect of building social connections and maintaining its informal character. In Farmer et al. (2021, p. 16) account the by-product of social connection can be enhanced by creating bumping spaces and empowering community connectors to create safe and welcoming spaces. These aspects can and should be planned for. Similarly volunteers and staff can be trained in interpersonal skills and engaged in regular conversation about social connection, isolation and loneliness to support them to identify, respond and document impact.

It appears that much of this work is already taking place in community centres. A central take away from this report is the potential to improve social connection through recognising and promoting the synergies between

existing practice and research. More explicit conversations, strategic planning and deliberate evaluation would likely enhance outcomes and provide a better insight into the existing impact of the work of community centres. In addition, it is clear that community centres have important insights to contribute to the literature on social isolation, connection and loneliness. Central among these insight is the application of ideas like community connectors and bumping spaces in a community centre context. The demographics and geography of the centres in this project were diverse, however, it appears that the social components of bumping spaces (in-between and beyond) was consistent and supports the need to think about social connection beyond the instrumental aspects of program delivery. Similarly, the consistent significance of volunteers as social connectors combined with an understanding of volunteers as a, if not the most, significant program for building social connection reinforces the need for further investment (resourcing and future research).



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Research Question: How can Community Centres SA and community centres replicate these core components in other programs/projects when planning for, and seeking funding for, outcomes that enhance meaningful social connection to address loneliness?

Community centres in South Australia could replicate the following components of successful programs in the planning and implementation of initiatives to address social isolation and loneliness to build social connection.

- Plan ahead
- Develop your volunteers
- Be visible in the community
- Welcome and help people feel safe
- Physical Space: Green and Blue Bumping Spaces
- Bumping Spaces: in-between and beyond

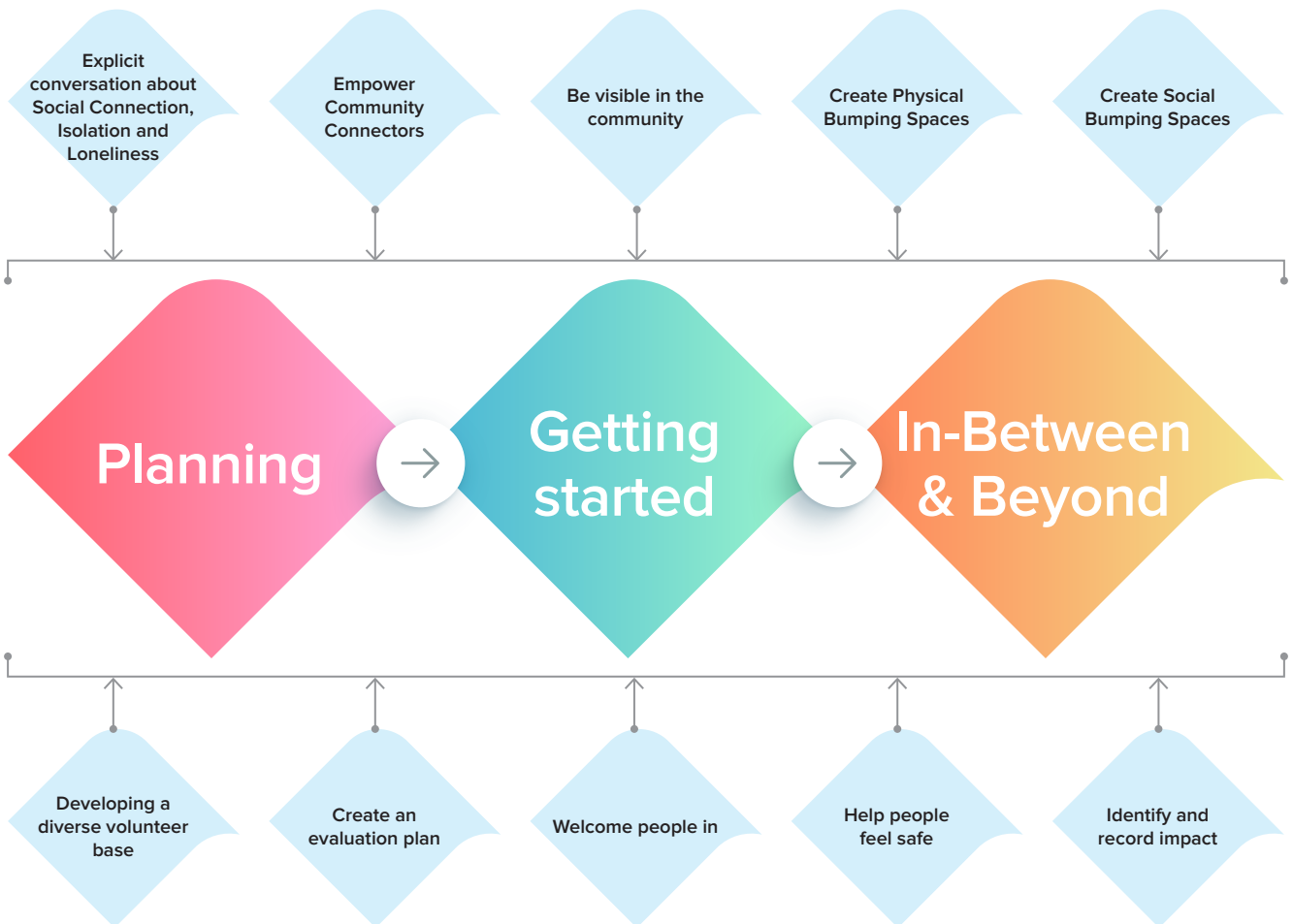
Furthermore, Community centres in South Australia would likely benefit from implementing the following additional components:

- Formally identify community connectors
- Be more explicit around key terms
- Diversify volunteer base
- Create social and physical bumping spaces
- Build in evaluation

Finally, when it comes to promoting their work and applying for funding the findings in this report suggest it is important that community centres avoid presenting their work solely in terms of the instrumental aspects of program delivery. Instead, centres need to described social connection outcomes as part of a multi-faceted suite of initiatives that create social and physical bumping spaces underpinned by community connectors who create safe and welcoming spaces. Investment in these elements facilitates social connection as an intentional 'by-product' of formal program delivery.

Replicating practices in other centres

The following diagram present these elements as a process.
These stages are not simply sequential, but are cyclical and non-linear.



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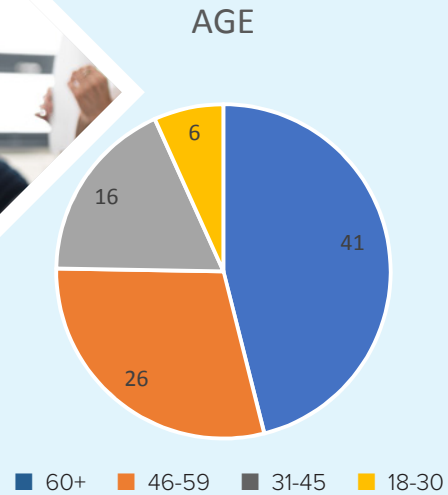
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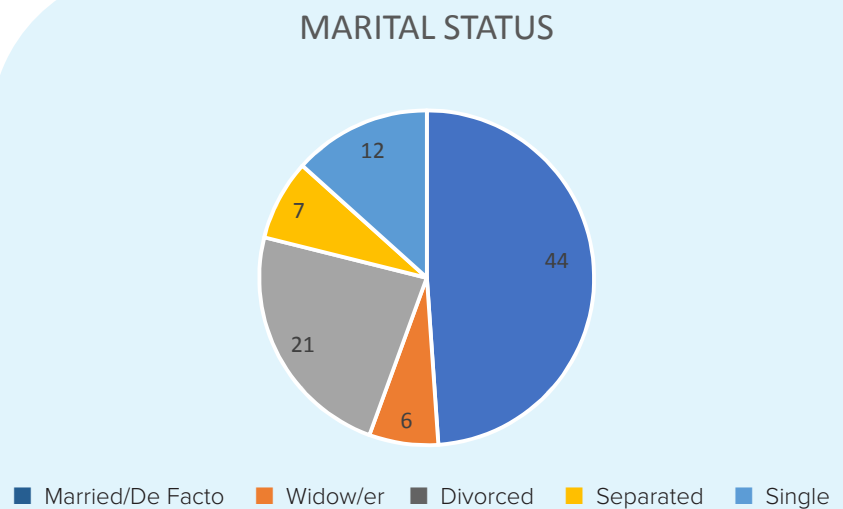
Appendix 1: Demographics of Participants

Figure 1: Age of participants



N=34 (27%) of participants did not give their age

Figure 2: Marital Status of participants



N=33 (27%) of participants did not declare their marital status

Figure 3: Nationality

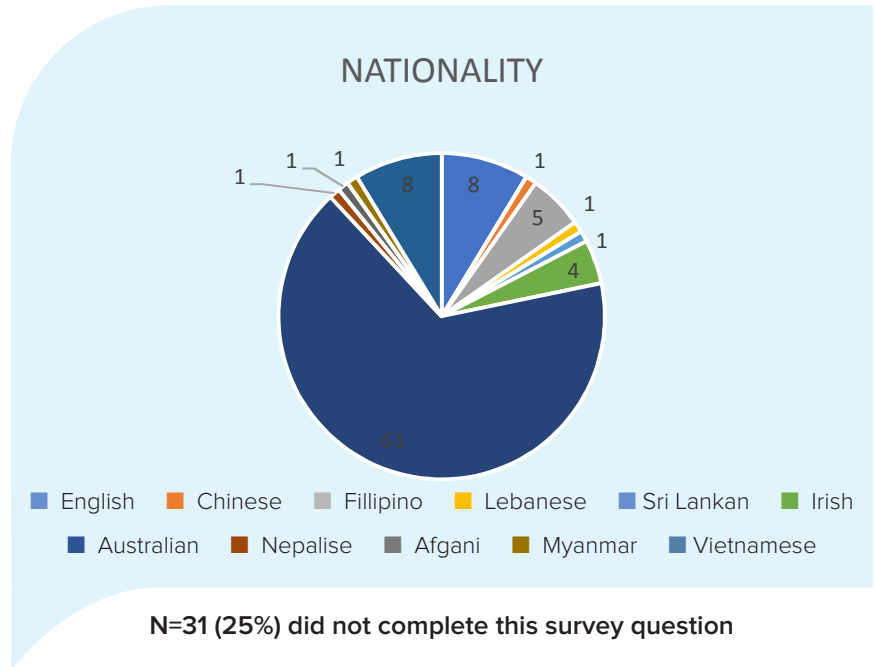


Figure 4: Employment status of participants in a Community centre setting.

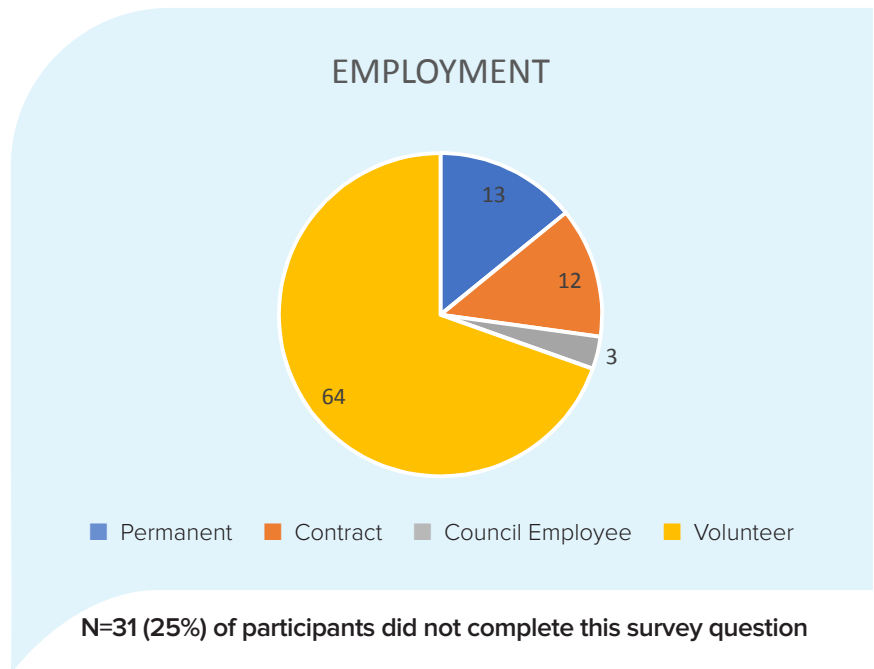


Figure 5

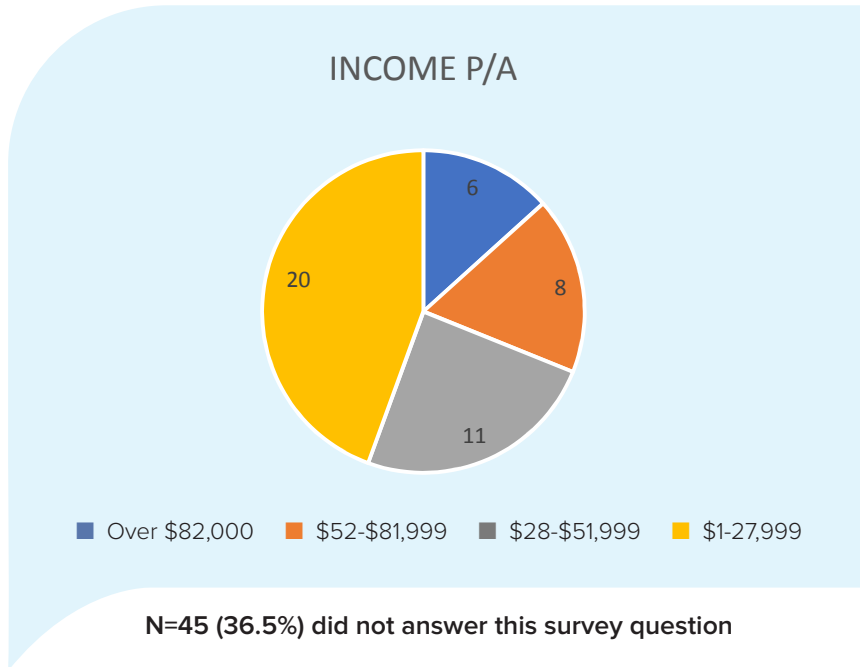
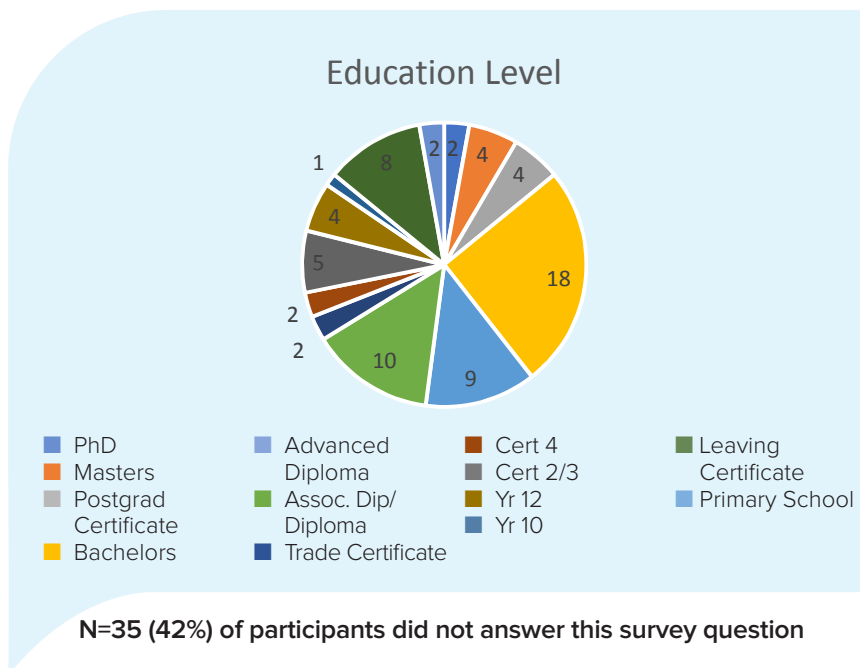


Figure 6





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