SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS PROJECT
REPORT 2019

Prepared for Inner South-east Metropolitan Partnership Working Group

INNER SOUTH-EAST
METROPOLITAN PARTNERSHIP

20 August 2019

Clear Horizon

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the thirty mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, sisters and brothers of the Inner South-east metropolitan region who took time out of their day to share their story of connecting to community. Thank you for trusting this research with your deeply personal account of lived experience in the Inner South-east metropolitan region.

We would also like to thank the hardworking individuals who continue to service their communities in their roles within government, private industry, faith-based groups, non-governmental organisations and community groups.

**Thank you for taking the time to enrich this research with your insights.**

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Introduction

This report presents the findings from a research project undertaken by Clear Horizon Consulting on behalf of Inner South-east Metropolitan Partnership Working Group. The report intends to showcase the lived experience of thirty inhabitants of the Inner South-East metropolitan region.

In respecting the experiences of these community members and in valuing a strengths-based approach, this report will henceforth refer to their stories as those of connectedness to community and refrain from labelling their experiences as those of social isolation or loneliness (unless identified as such by the relevant participant). These stories of connectedness will ground a broader exploration of social isolation and loneliness that draws on the insights of service providers (understood as any entity providing services to the community) and a review of academic and grey literature.
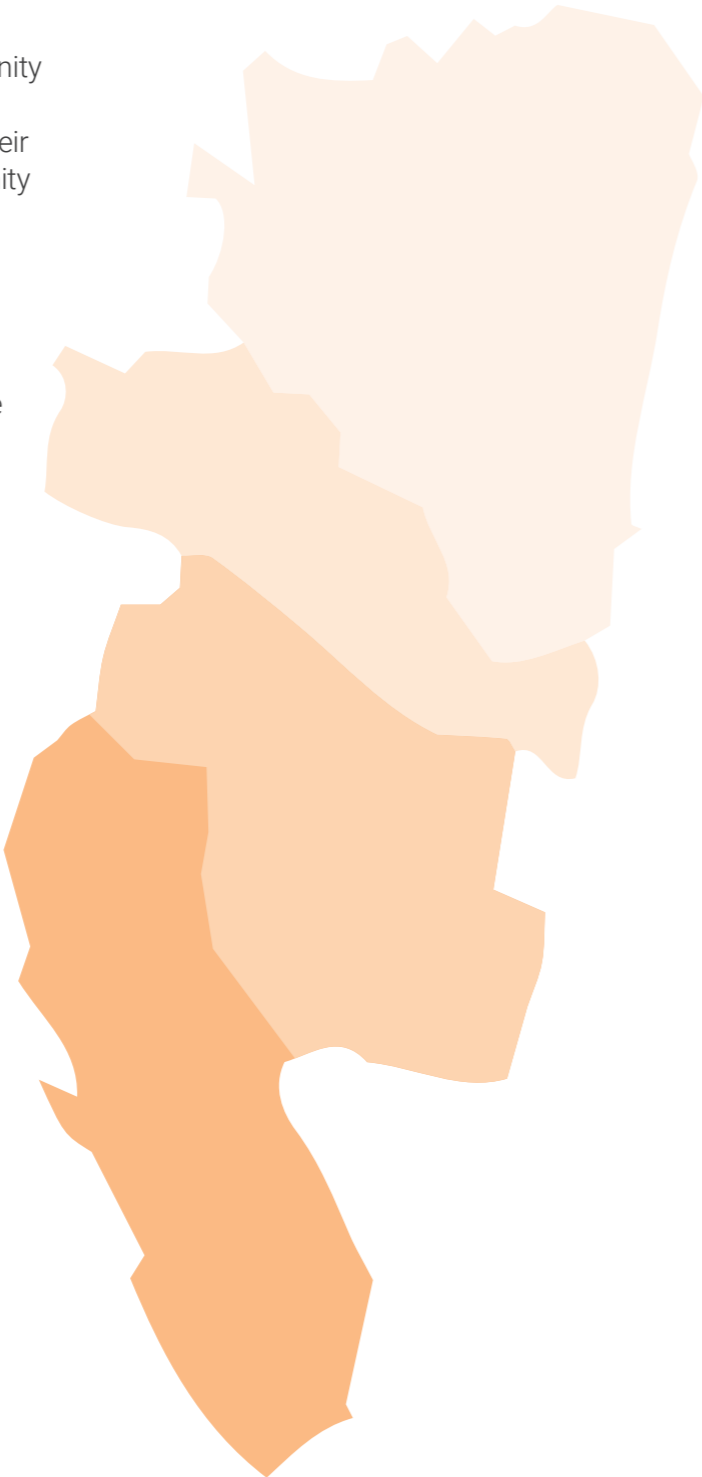
Background

The Social Isolation and Loneliness Project

The Social Isolation and Loneliness Project is an initiative delivered by the Inner South-east Metropolitan Partnership Working Group and overseen by the Inner South-east Metropolitan Partnership. The function of the Partnership is to engage with the wider Inner South-east metropolitan community to identify issues and opportunities, which are then synthesised to advise State Government on the priorities for this region (Victorian State Government 2019).

The aim of the Social Isolation and Loneliness Project is to capture and communicate the stories of people experiencing social isolation and loneliness within the Inner South-east Metropolitan Region, consisting of the Boroondara, Bayside, Glen Eira and Stonnington local government areas (LGAs). To narrow the scope of the project, the Inner South-east Metropolitan Partnership requested that Clear Horizon undertake a series of consultations with community members from the following demographics:

1. People above the age of 60 years

2. Stay at home mothers

3. Young people aged 17 to 25 years

The selection of these three population cohorts stemmed from the Partnership's understanding of the community members most vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness in their region and also the Partnership's interest in learning about lived experiences across a range of age groups.

The project delivers unique research for the Inner South-east Metropolitan Region that brings local lived experience to the forefront by telling the narrative of those feeling socially isolated and lonely.

Social Isolation, Loneliness and Connectedness to Community

According to the document review, social isolation and loneliness, although different terms, are at times used interchangeably. Where loneliness is described as a largely intrapersonal experience or state of being, social isolation is broadly defined in systemic terms and within the context of community life (Centre for Social and Early Emotional Development 2016, p. 26).

The term loneliness is further described as a subjective, largely unwelcome experience that results from a discrepancy between what we desire in our social relationships versus the actual quantity and quality of these (Australian Psychological Society & Swinburne University of Technology 2018). Social isolation is defined as 'an objective state of having minimal contact and interaction with others and a low level of involvement with community life' (Commissioner for Senior Victorians 2016, p. 9). Social isolation relates to an individual's interaction with their broader societal environment and often occurs as the result of several intersecting factors, many of which are compounded by a lack functional social support and access.

Community connectedness is another term utilised heavily across the literature and in this research. Community connectedness is defined as the extent that individuals are or feel able to 'engage, participate and interact with others in the community overall' (Centre for Social and Early Development 2016, p. 26). The extent to which someone is connected to their community and the quality of these connections directly impacts a number of factors in a person's life. This includes their quality of life, their sense of belonging and their participation in their community. The term community connectedness is different from social isolation and loneliness, but it informs and creates the preconditions for both.

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Methodology

Discovery Questions

In order to establish a clear scope for this research, the following Discovery questions were developed in consultation with representatives of the Inner South-east Metropolitan Partnership:

1. What are the causes of loneliness for older people, stay at home mothers and young people in the Inner South-east Metropolitan Region?

2. What barriers to, and enablers of, participation do older people, stay at home mothers and young people face in the Inner South-east Metropolitan Region?

3. Throughout this research, what have we learnt about solutions to social isolation and loneliness in the Inner South-east Metropolitan Region?

Document review

Clear Horizon first undertook a review of documents provided by the Inner South-east Metropolitan Partnership Working Group. The purpose of this review was to provide an overview of the existing academic and grey literature that surrounds social isolation and to understand the gaps in information that exist at the Inner South-east Metropolitan Region level. The reviewed documents are included in the References section of this report.

The findings from the document review indicated the lack of granular knowledge about lived experience within the Inner South-east metropolitan region, serving to reinforce the value of a qualitative deep dive into the stories of its constituents. Where relevant, findings from the document review were utilised to supplement the findings from the community consultations and workshop with service providers.

Planning workshop

A planning workshop was held in collaboration with the Inner South-east Metropolitan Working Group. The workshop was used to revisit the scope, Discovery questions and approach to community consultations. Using their knowledge of the Inner South-East region, the Working Group identified target community groups that were later taken to the Inner South-east Metropolitan Partnership for prioritisation, as well as the nature of the consultations to be undertaken by Clear Horizon. Leveraging on their Inner South-East networks, representatives of the Working Group played a central role in recruiting community participants for the consultations as well as engaging service providers for the service provider workshop that followed.

Community consultations

Conversations were held with 30 participants from amongst the three identified demographics: ten older people, nine young people and eleven stay at home mothers who chose to contribute their stories. Initially stay at home parents were targeted but it was only stay at home mothers that opted to take part in the interviews. Everyone interviewed identified as previously or currently experiencing social isolation and loneliness. During the interviews the participants were asked to reflect on times where they felt disconnected from their community and to share examples of their experiences during this time in their life. This approach was especially important as it was likely that the research did not have access to the most vulnerable members of the Inner South-east Metropolitan Region who are currently experiencing severe periods of social isolation and loneliness. However, although some of the participants interviewed were more connected then they had been previously they were able to reflect on times in their life when they too were experiencing severe social isolation and loneliness and provide insight into their experiences at that time.

These conversations took place in a focus group setting (with seven young people) or as individual phone conversations, and were used to understand:

1. What makes individuals feel connected to their community

2. What makes individuals feel less connected to their community

3. The factors resulting in a transition between a sense of connectedness and disconnectedness to community

All participants currently reside within the Inner South-east Metropolitan Region and identified as being from a range of ethnic, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Some participants also identified themselves as having experienced mental health struggles or as living with a disability, highlighting the intersectionality of our participant sample.

Following the consultations, participants were invited to provide feedback on the journey maps created using their stories. This feedback mechanism was embedded into this research to make sure that the outputs of the research are truly representative of the participants and that the research is held accountable to its storytellers.

Service provider workshop

On 2nd August 2019, a workshop was held with service providers from within the Inner South-east metropolitan region. For the purpose of this research, service providers are understood as any entity providing services to the community irrespective of whether they are a public, private, faith-based or community organisation. The workshop was intended to enrich this report with insights from the perspective of the service system.

Outputs

Journey maps

The stories of connectedness to community culminated in the creation of three journey maps, one for each of the target demographics. Each journey map is a consolidated representation of the causes associated with feelings of connectedness and less connectedness, as well as the pivots resulting in a transition between the two. Each journey map is enriched with the words of our participants and identify three case studies of significant overarching themes that influence the experiences of a majority of our participants.

Assets-based map

The community consultations were also used to produce an assets-based map (also understood as a service map). The assets-based map is intended to identify the current services accessed by our community participants that they associate with feeling connected to community. The assets-based map categorises these services as government and public services, private industry, community and non-government organisations (NGOs), faith-based or technology. By mapping current assets, the map indicates the types of services our participants turn to and whether these services are located within the Inner South-east metropolitan region.

Our Stories
of Connectedness

GROWING OLDER

I work very hard to make sure I get out every second day and I do get out. That's part of why I'm not isolated – I give myself a reason to leave the house. I also try to keep in contact with my family weekly, but I try not to get in their way. I know I'm an old person now and I remember what it was like to be young.

SOCIAL MEDIA & TECHNOLOGY

I play Scrabble and Words with Friends with my children on my laptop. We play about 20 to 30 games a week. Although some of my children live overseas, I speak to them on Skype occasionally. But my children never think to give me a phone call. Not for a chat. They just say, "we see you playing Scrabble online, so we know you're alright". I know everything is going electronic, but so many people don't have access because they're not feeling comfortable with computing or can't afford internet access. With older people it's not that they don't want to learn, it's just that they can't afford it. My council runs classes for older people but I know people who can't afford to have an internet connection.
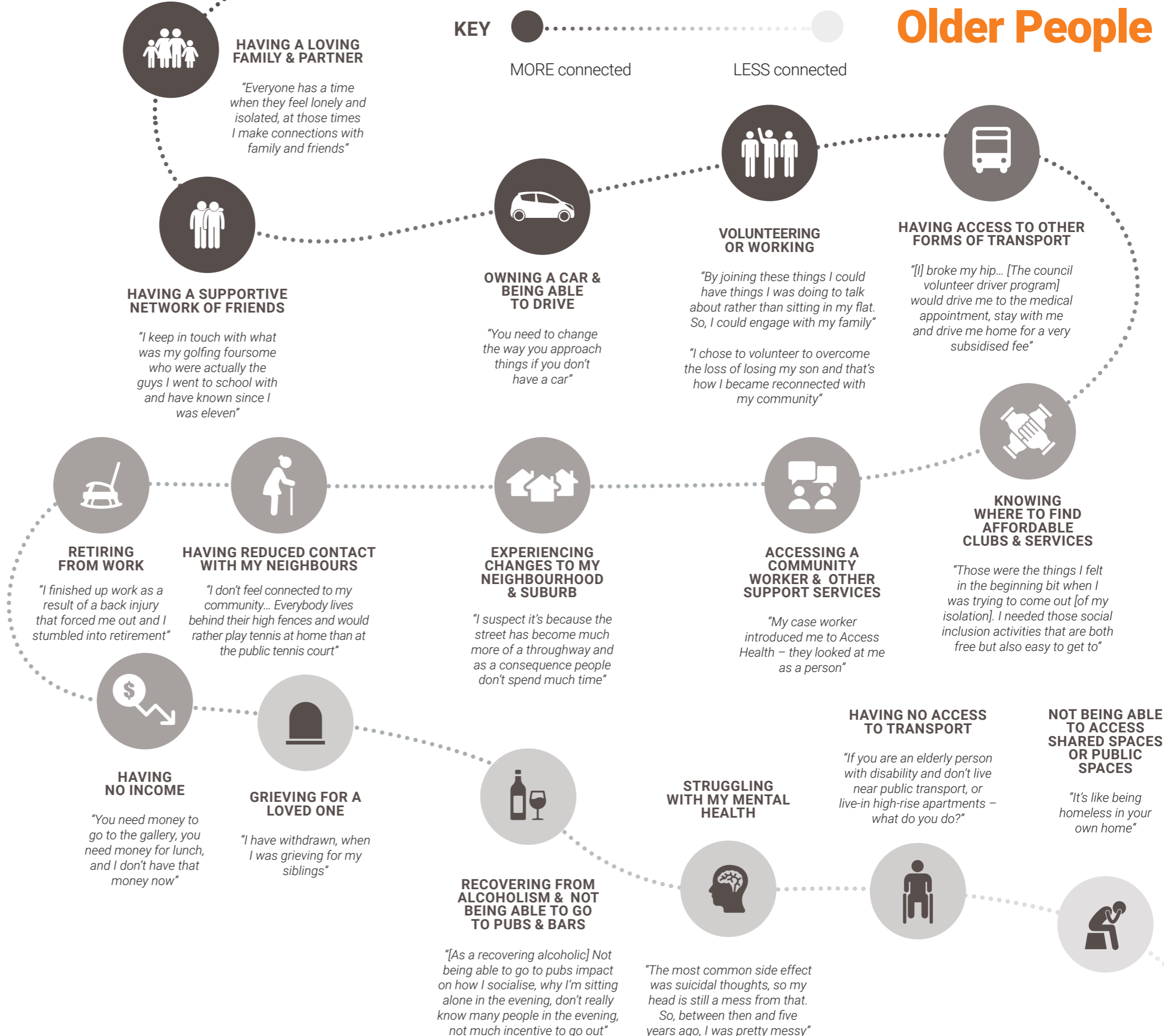
CHANGING PHYSICAL HEALTH

Because I'm deaf it's easy to get isolated. I avoid noisy places and so I avoid some social opportunities. A second reason is because I'm hard of hearing some people get put off because I look at their mouths so intently because I'm trying to lip read. And then there's the fact that it's hard to have an in-depth conversation with people because I'm focusing on the words and not the content.

WHO ARE WE?

- Older people living alone
- Older people in relationships
- Those whose partners have passed away
- Those living in public housing
- Older home owners

KEY

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MORE connected   LESS connected

Older People

HAVING A LOVING FAMILY & PARTNER

"Everyone has a time when they feel lonely and isolated, at those times I make connections with family and friends"

HAVING A SUPPORTIVE NETWORK OF FRIENDS

"I keep in touch with what was my golfing foursome who were actually the guys I went to school with and have known since I was eleven"

OWNING A CAR & BEING ABLE TO DRIVE

"You need to change the way you approach things if you don't have a car"

VOLUNTEERING OR WORKING

"By joining these things I could have things I was doing to talk about rather than sitting in my flat. So, I could engage with my family"

"I chose to volunteer to overcome the loss of losing my son and that's how I became reconnected with my community"

HAVING ACCESS TO OTHER FORMS OF TRANSPORT

"[I] broke my hip... [The council volunteer driver program] would drive me to the medical appointment, stay with me and drive me home for a very subsidised fee"

RETIRING FROM WORK

"I finished up work as a result of a back injury that forced me out and I stumbled into retirement"

HAVING REDUCED CONTACT WITH MY NEIGHBOURS

"I don't feel connected to my community... Everybody lives behind their high fences and would rather play tennis at home than at the public tennis court"

EXPERIENCING CHANGES TO MY NEIGHBOURHOOD & SUBURB

"I suspect it's because the street has become much more of a throughway and as a consequence people don't spend much time"

ACCESSING A COMMUNITY WORKER & OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES

"My case worker introduced me to Access Health – they looked at me as a person"

KNOWING WHERE TO FIND AFFORDABLE CLUBS & SERVICES

"Those were the things I felt in the beginning bit when I was trying to come out [of my isolation]. I needed those social inclusion activities that are both free but also easy to get to"

HAVING NO INCOME

"You need money to go to the gallery, you need money for lunch, and I don't have that money now"

GRIEVING FOR A LOVED ONE

"I have withdrawn, when I was grieving for my siblings"

RECOVERING FROM ALCOHOLISM & NOT BEING ABLE TO GO TO PUBS & BARS

"[As a recovering alcoholic] Not being able to go to pubs impact on how I socialise, why I'm sitting alone in the evening, don't really know many people in the evening, not much incentive to go out"

STRUGGLING WITH MY MENTAL HEALTH

"The most common side effect was suicidal thoughts, so my head is still a mess from that. So, between then and five years ago, I was pretty messy"

HAVING NO ACCESS TO TRANSPORT

"If you are an elderly person with disability and don't live near public transport, or live-in high-rise apartments – what do you do?"

NOT BEING ABLE TO ACCESS SHARED SPACES OR PUBLIC SPACES

"It's like being homeless in your own home"

Our Stories
of Connectedness

CHILDREN GROWING OLDER

For mums, when their kids start school they start to think "Where am I? What am I?" Things change and they don't know who they are. Especially if they are not working and stay at home, because everything for them is around their kids. I no longer go to the mothers' group because my kids are older now and go to childcare. I do feel quite isolated during the day because I don't go out a lot. Especially during school hours.

WORKING LIFE

For the most part, work would be my number one social network. Not working, I feel isolated in terms of adult engagement. I had very close friendships in my workplace. There were lots of social opportunities. So, I really miss work a lot. Now I've taken almost one year of maternity leave and I haven't really seen anyone. It's actually quite lonely because there is no one to share it with. I know some mothers who had no time whatsoever for their community while working full-time. Now they have more time to connect to their community through other mothers.
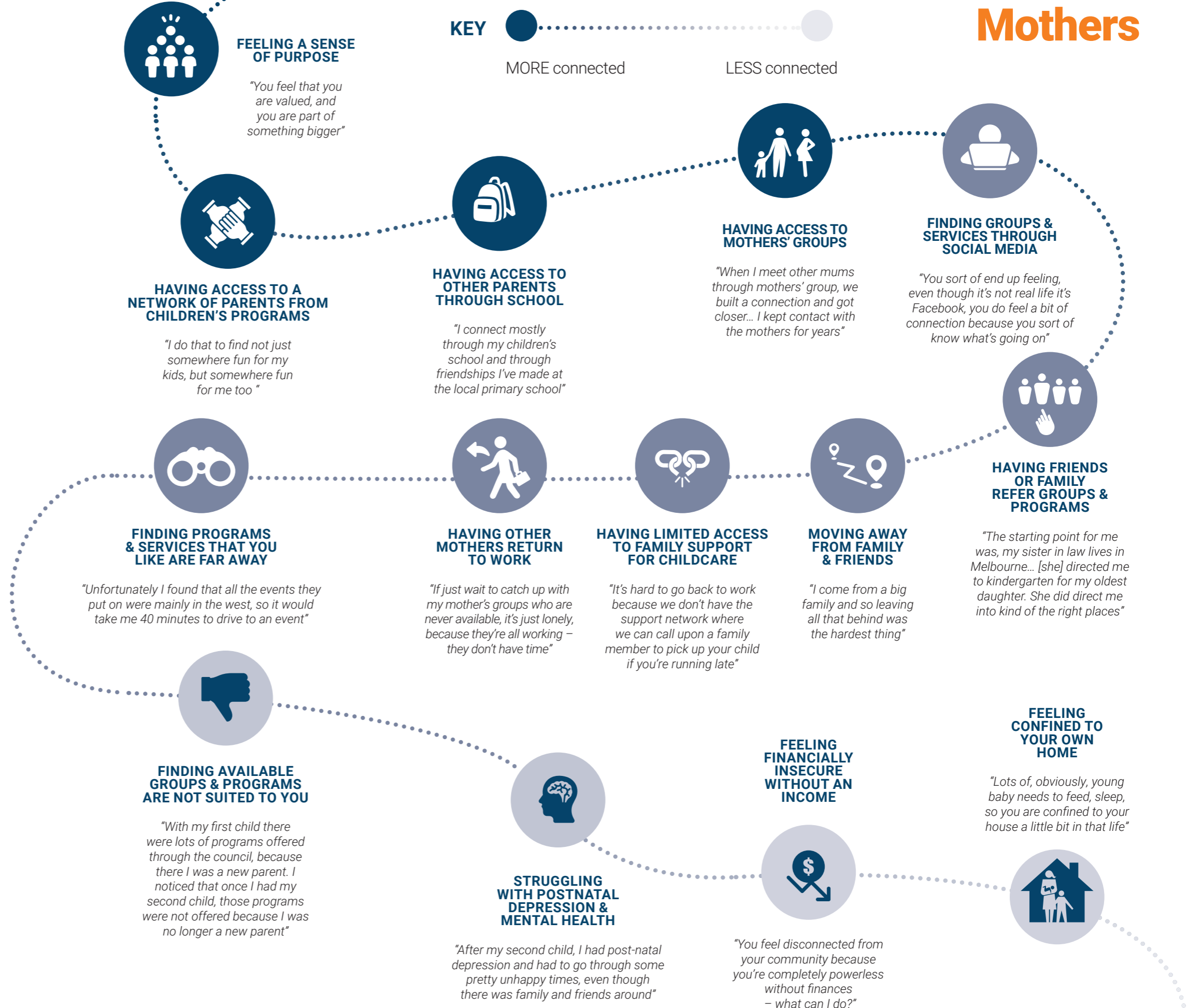
MOVING HOUSE

Moving to Melbourne – away from my family and community and everything I knew – was quite a big deal. It didn't matter how social you are as a person but it still hard to be in a new place not knowing anyone. I come from a big family and so leaving all that behind was the hardest thing. In Melbourne, the next-door neighbour doesn't know you, the person down the street doesn't know you, whereas being in a small community, everybody knows each other. I was known, and here I'm just nobody. I had to re-establish myself as a mother in a different place and create a sense of community. I'm still working on building those relationships.

WHO ARE WE?

- Young mothers
- Mature aged mothers
- Mothers from culturally & linguistically diverse backgrounds
- Mothers who moved interstate
- Mothers who moved internationally
- Mothers on maternity leave
- Stay at home mothers
- Mothers with their second child

Mothers

KEY

MORE connected   LESS connected

FEELING A SENSE OF PURPOSE

"You feel that you are valued, and you are part of something bigger"

HAVING ACCESS TO A NETWORK OF PARENTS FROM CHILDREN'S PROGRAMS

"I do that to find not just somewhere fun for my kids, but somewhere fun for me too "

HAVING ACCESS TO OTHER PARENTS THROUGH SCHOOL

"I connect mostly through my children's school and through friendships I've made at the local primary school"

HAVING ACCESS TO MOTHERS' GROUPS

"When I meet other mums through mothers' group, we built a connection and got closer... I kept contact with the mothers for years"

FINDING GROUPS & SERVICES THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

"You sort of end up feeling, even though it's not real life it's Facebook, you do feel a bit of connection because you sort of know what's going on"

HAVING FRIENDS OR FAMILY REFER GROUPS & PROGRAMS

"The starting point for me was, my sister in law lives in Melbourne... [she] directed me to kindergarten for my oldest daughter. She did direct me into kind of the right places"

FINDING PROGRAMS & SERVICES THAT YOU LIKE ARE FAR AWAY

"Unfortunately I found that all the events they put on were mainly in the west, so it would take me 40 minutes to drive to an event"

HAVING OTHER MOTHERS RETURN TO WORK

"If just wait to catch up with my mother's groups who are never available, it's just lonely, because they're all working – they don't have time"

HAVING LIMITED ACCESS TO FAMILY SUPPORT FOR CHILDCARE

"It's hard to go back to work because we don't have the support network where we can call upon a family member to pick up your child if you're running late"

MOVING AWAY FROM FAMILY & FRIENDS

"I come from a big family and so leaving all that behind was the hardest thing"

FINDING AVAILABLE GROUPS & PROGRAMS ARE NOT SUITED TO YOU

"With my first child there were lots of programs offered through the council, because there I was a new parent. I noticed that once I had my second child, those programs were not offered because I was no longer a new parent"

STRUGGLING WITH POSTNATAL DEPRESSION & MENTAL HEALTH

"After my second child, I had post-natal depression and had to go through some pretty unhappy times, even though there was family and friends around"

FEELING FINANCIALLY INSECURE WITHOUT AN INCOME

"You feel disconnected from your community because you're completely powerless without finances – what can I do?"

FEELING CONFINED TO YOUR OWN HOME

"Lots of, obviously, young baby needs to feed, sleep, so you are confined to your house a little bit in that life"

Our Stories
of Connectedness

SOCIAL MEDIA & TECHNOLOGY

Now we have less face-to-face contact because of our online culture. Increasingly, our communication is online and there is an expectation that you have your phone on you all the time.

If you look at relationships on Tinder it's all about what you look like and a ten word biography. It might be considered involvement, but to me I don't really think so.

TRANSITIONING FROM HOMELESSNESS

The time I felt isolated from the community was when I had external circumstances going on within my home life and it affected my school life.

I felt like I was so disconnected from my usual school community.

I felt so isolated because no one really understood the hardships I had to go through. Now that I'm not in such a hard place, I'm connecting back into the community.

LEAVING SCHOOL

I feel there is straight away isolation after leaving school. Especially if you do not do anything like university, work or TAFE immediately after.

School is so structured and has continuous opportunities for social interaction. But once you leave school all that structure and infrastructure is missing.

WHO ARE WE?

• 17 to 25 year olds
• Employed youth
• Students
• Young people living independently
• Young people in crisis accommodation

Young People

KEY

MORE connected   LESS connected

FEELING CONFIDENT & VALUED

"Your opinions matter and you can do it on your own!"

HAVING LIKE-MINDED FRIENDS

"It's just easier to connect with people who have the same problems as you"

VOLUNTEERING

"I do some work at the Odyssey House and Headspace"

OWNING A CAR & BEING ABLE TO DRIVE

"Having a car"

HAVING ACCESS TO OTHER FORMS OF TRANSPORT

"Having transport, especially at night"

FINDING CLUBS & PROGRAMS ARE HARD TO GET TO

"Community activities and things being inaccessible — not close to public transport or hard to find"

FINDING TRANSPORT TO BE EXPENSIVE

"Living is expensive and its expensive to go out and see friends. It costs $8.80 for an entire day by myki if you don't have a car"

HAVING REDUCED PROXIMITY TO FRIENDS

"Connecting with friends becomes hard when you are trying to work around the distance and making time"

HAVING A LOW INCOME

"Minimum wage doesn't allow young people to do things that connect [to the community]"

ACCESSING A COMMUNITY WORKER & OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES

"My drug and alcohol worker was very helpful... They were supportive in regards to my housing and home life and other things"

FINDING SPORTS CLUBS & OTHER PROGRAMS TO BE EXPENSIVE

"The cost of paying for dance lessons is too high"

FEELING THAT YOUR FRIENDS ARE UNABLE TO RELATE TO YOU

"When you go through situations that young people usually don't have to deal with and you do, and everybody else doesn't really understand what is going on"

FEELING DISCONNECTED FROM OTHER YOUNG PEOPLE

"Lots of jobs I've worked, I also haven't been around young people so, the lack of access to other young people has been a major thing in my life"

FEELING UNSAFE

"Feeling unsafe to go out in the dark or to go home after work in winter"

FEELING INTIMIDATED & UNWELCOME

"They don't recognise our beliefs and fears and minimalise our emotions and issues"

INNER SOUTH-EAST METROPOLITAN PARTNERSHIP

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Understanding the causes of social isolation and loneliness

Table 1. Causes of social isolation and loneliness

OLDER PEOPLE	STAY AT HOME MOTHERS	YOUNG PEOPLE
Retirement The lifestyle change associated with retirement can trigger isolation or loneliness. Often, retirement may be coupled with an unexpected turn of events, such as injury, and catalyses barriers such as affordability. *"[It's] not quite as much when I was working."*	**Not working** Stay at home mothers spoke about how taking maternity leave from work or not working was a cause of social isolation and loneliness. *"Even though I've had one year of maternity leave, I haven't really seen anyone."* *"I guess I'm not working yet, so I still feel isolated in terms of adult engagement."*	**Transitioning from high school** Young people participating in the focus group and one young person who participated in the interview consultations cited the departure from school as causing social isolation and loneliness, specifically as a result of the lack of structure available at school.
Caring for loved ones *"At the time I was transitioning I was caring for sick relatives, felt a bit isolated in myself, combination of grief, not loneliness but deliberately felt isolated."*	**Other mothers returning to work** Similarly, stay at home mothers also identified fellow mothers returning to work as a cause of loneliness. *"A lot of my friends went back to work or have other children to take care of."*	**Transitioning from university to work** Young people who participated in the focus group felt that there were no support services available for young people coming out of university and trying to enter the workforce.
The loss of a loved one Two older people cited the loss of loved ones as causing them to disconnect from their community. One older woman reflected on this experience as being on of voluntary isolation and not a trigger for loneliness. Losing a loved one may also result in changes to lifestyle and circumstances, such as leaving work or taking on the duty of care. *"[When my son died] I had four months away from work and I felt disconnected as a result of grief".*	**Moving** Many of our participating stay at home mothers discussed moving regionally, interstate or internationally as having had a large impact on their stories of connectedness. Mothers associated moving with their perception of the new suburb, their limited social networks as well as their lack of knowledge about the services available to them in their new suburbs. *"[When I moved to Melbourne] it didn't feel like it was my place."*	**Moving** One young person also identified moving as a cause of social isolation and loneliness. *"Moving to a new town, it's really hard to know what clubs/ groups are in the area, and if newcomers are welcome."*
Addiction One older person discussed how socialising becomes a barrier when you are recovering from substance abuse as most social spaces serve alcohol or friends and acquaintances prefer to meet at pubs or bars.		**Growing apart from friends** Young people discussed the loss of connections as a result of being at a different phase of life to friend. One young person discussed how experiencing homelessness led to their friends being unable to relate to them whilst participants at the focus group discussed the impact of beginning relationships on friendships. *"I definitely felt so isolated because no one really understands the hardships I had to go through."*

Table 1. Continued.

OLDER PEOPLE	STAY AT HOME MOTHERS	YOUNG PEOPLE
Mental health An older person discussed the impact of mental health on social isolation and loneliness, recognising that bad mental health would cause them to isolate themselves. *"If I'm having a really bad day, I kind of just disregard [the opportunities circulated to me]."*	**Children growing older** Stay at home mothers with older children associated social isolation and loneliness with their children beginning school or no longer being eligible for programs and activities. *"I no longer go to the mothers' group because my kids are older now and go to childcare."*	**Reduced geographical proximity to friends** Participants at the focus group identified moving further away from friends, or friends moving further away, as a cause of loneliness.
Changing physical health Changing physical health was talked about by older people, in the context of injury and living with disability. Older people discussed their experiences of loneliness and social isolation following a demobilising injury (like hip injuries) as well as their perception of how such injuries may impact on their lives.	**Postnatal depression** One stay at home mother discussed her experience of postnatal depression as having caused her to feel disconnected from her community. *"My condition wasn't diagnosed for 2 years; I didn't know why I was feeling like this".*	**Increasing online communication** Young people identified a reduction in face-to-face contact as a result of increasing online communication. Young people also discussed the move toward online dating platforms such as Tinder, which they perceived as superficial, and associated feelings of social isolation with the way in which people communicate on these platforms. *"I feel that most people are not connecting in person, they're more connecting online when they're at home. It might be considered involvement, but to me I don't really think so."*
Reduced contact with neighbours *"The main one is I don't have neighbour contact anymore because their either not at home or it's a language and cultural barrier. That's a day to day thing that really impacts on my life".*	**Addiction** *"I became more and more dependent on alcohol. By Christmas, I was drinking quite a lot and it was isolating me."* **Reduced geographical proximity to family and friends** *"I only have a sister, but she is quite busy, and I don't have any relatives here because they are all overseas."* *"But we do really miss our friends [who live in their hometown], and if we want to see them, we generally have to go and stay down there because it's just a pain, in a day, to drive up and back"*	

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Understanding the barriers to overcoming social isolation and loneliness

Table 2. Barriers to overcoming social isolation and loneliness

OLDER PEOPLE	STAY AT HOME MOTHERS	YOUNG PEOPLE
Inaccessibility Accessibility was frequently discussed by older people, especially when talking about transport. Older people discussed the need for more community transport options and also associated inaccessibility with ageing. *"Part of the isolation is that we are all getting older so it's more difficult to get out."* *"I try to get people in my building to go places but it's too hard for them to get there. We need a community bus."* **Changing suburbs** Two older people identified changes in their suburb as having created barriers for overcoming social isolation and loneliness. One person talked about how increased shops on her street has meant that there are less opportunities for her friends to visit because it is harder to find parking nearby. *"People can't visit me anymore because there's nowhere to park."* **Changing neighbourhoods** Similarly, another older person discussed changes in their suburb that directly impacted the demographics in her neighbourhood. *"As I live in a unit, we used to get together and do the gardening together, the lady in the front used to make morning tea and we used to collect each other's mail…"*	**Lack of income** Having a lack of income was mentioned by stay at home mothers as barrier to overcoming social isolation and loneliness because they felt that they were unable to afford access to places of social connectedness (such as gyms). *"I feel disconnected because of finances to pay for things like exercising and that."* **Perception of a lack appropriate programs** Stay at home mothers perceived that there was a lack of age appropriate programs in their community, where age appropriateness referred to themselves as mothers or their children. This included a lack of free programs for second born children. *"I just feel like there's not enough community groups or social groups around [in my age bracket]. It tends to be for more older people or for people with babies."* **Perception of a lack of culturally secular mothers' programs** One stay at home mother made a similar comment about cultural appropriateness. *"And then there was specifically [mother's groups] that I couldn't attend because they were Mandarin-speaking mother's groups."*	**Limited income** Young people discussed the difficulty to afford access to social spaces as a result of limited income. They associated the need to save money and support themselves whilst often earning minimum wage with a barrier to overcoming social isolation and loneliness. Young people also talked about the perception of age as having implications for the work opportunities available to them. *"[Being told that you are] too old for retail"* **Inaccessible transport** Participants identified public transport as being expensive and suggested that not having accessible transport (especially at night) impact on their social connectedness. **Limited youth run programs** Participants felt the content of programs were outdated, especially as they are not youth-led. *"[We need] programs run by young people that aren't cringey."*

Table 2. Continued.

OLDER PEOPLE	STAY AT HOME MOTHERS	YOUNG PEOPLE
"…We would look after each other. Now the whole demographics of the tenants has changed. The previous owners moved out" **Inaccessible shared spaces** One older person identified an inability to access the shared spaces in her high-rise housing as a barrier to her opportunities to connect. *"I don't like having people in my flat, that's my safe haven. But the community room was locked and so we couldn't meet there."* **Social media and technology** Social media and technology were referred to by multiple older people. One older person discussed how being unable to afford a computer and uncomfortable with learning how to use technology meant that he could not access information about community programs and activities. This issue with of digitised information was also mentioned by another older person. *"If you live in an apartment with three or more apartments, the deliverers have been told that it's one newspaper per building. You can read it online, but I don't think to do that every week. So many people are missing this information like I am."* **Lack of income and affordability** Older people talked about no longer having an income and concerns about the costs of joining clubs or programs in their community.	**Distance travelled to access programs** Where they found programs of interest to them, stay at home mothers spoke about difficulty accessing these programs because they were located further away. **Perception of limited information about programs and services** *"I didn't even know [that] there's a community service for vaccinations – I had no idea… It had never been mentioned to me at any point – not at the hospital or anywhere."* **Limited family support** Participants identified limited family support as a barrier to overcoming social isolation and loneliness. Limited family support was associated with geographical distance as well as rifts in families. *"I am not connecting with my family; I have nothing to do with them."* **Difficult accessing childcare** Not finding childcare services that have spaces available or affordable. **Newborn babies' routines** Not being as available due to fitting in with your newborns sleeping or feeding routine. **Waiting lists** *"There is a lot of support but there's so many waiting lists that it makes it harder to access the services."*	**Limited age appropriate programs** A lack of age appropriate programs was cited by young people. Where youth programs are available, participants felt that they did not cater to their age group of 17 to 25 years old, such as being scheduled during work hours. *"[We need] groups that are purpose driven… more age specific. Not just [for] 12-25 years [old]."* *"23 to 25 year old's may be working 9-5 now, [and are] not always available for things at 2pm"* **Perception spaces are not inclusive** Young people felt unwelcome at social events, especially where they are full of adults. One young person discussed being told by adults that they were "too loud" when out with friends.

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Understanding the enablers to overcoming social isolation and loneliness

Table 3. Enablers to overcoming social isolation and loneliness

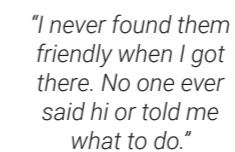| OLDER PEOPLE	STAY AT HOME MOTHERS	YOUNG PEOPLE
Support networks Older people identified extensive support networks as enabling them to overcome instances of social isolation and loneliness. These networks included children and family, former colleagues, friends and partners. *"My son has been very supportive. He rings every couple of days, we catch up twice a week."* *"I have a lady friend who takes up a good bit of my time and we travel a lot together."* **Hobbies** One older person described her hobby of knitting as keeping her connected to her community. *"I spend my time knitting for charity, I've been knitting for charity for 20 years now."* **Volunteering** Older people discussed volunteering as an opportunity to connect to their community. One older person spoke about how volunteering allowed them to reconnect to community after a traumatic event (the loss of their son) while another discussed the spill over benefit of volunteer work for the social connectedness of others within the community. *"I delivered meals for 7 years. One good thing with Delivered Meals is that the client at least has contact with someone for 5 minutes every day. And some of them you can tell want you to stay on with them."*	**Mothers' programs** Many stay at home mothers talked about mothers' groups as having enabled them to overcome social isolation and loneliness by introducing them to support networks and helping them overcome perceptions of their neighbourhood – a point that is especially relevant to newly relocated mothers. *"The mothers I have met through the mother's groups we have connected at some point because we live in the same area. So, it's easier to maintain a friendship through that."* **Support networks** Friends and family were the most commonly discussed support networks. *"I've got one friend that I know from [my hometown] that lives here, so I might catch up with her"* **Children** Stay at home mothers also identified their children as enabling them to connect to community through participation in children's programs and services. By participating in children's programs, stay at home mothers also stated that they met other parents with whom they became friends. *"I do a lot of activities with my daughter."* *"I take my children to [a cultural] music class, and then [to two cultural] play groups... I've managed by default meet people who are doing the same [classes for their children] as me."*	**Inclusive spaces** *"Spaces like universities that bring people together."* **Support networks** Young people primarily referred to friends and social services as support networks that enabled them to overcome social isolation and loneliness. *"My drug and alcohol worker was very helpful... They were supportive in regards to my housing and home life and other things."* *"I usually spend my week with mates"* **Affordable programs and transport** Participants identified affordable transport as well as payment plans for sporting clubs and programs as solutions for overcoming loneliness and social isolation. **Volunteering** One young person discussed how volunteering enabled them to feel less socially isolated.

Table 3. Continued.

OLDER PEOPLE	STAY AT HOME MOTHERS	YOUNG PEOPLE
Community services *"I'd been in Australia exactly 3 weeks when my daughter took me to the East Bentleigh Senior Citizens Club because she knew someone how went and from that time I was connected."* **Social media and technology** *"I am always speaking to my daughters in England on Skype, once a fortnight"* **Affordable services** Older people discussed the availability of free or low-cost programs as enabling them to connect to their community. Some of the named services were external to the Inner South-east region. *"[St Kilda PCYC] is affordable, it's fantastic."* **Faith based groups** *"Church is a very big part of my community... That would be my primary connection other than my family."* **Personality and mindset** Older people also referred to personality and their mindset as an enabler that differentiated them from others. *"It's easy for me because I am very outgoing."*	**Social media and technology** Participants discussed the opportunities provided by social media and technology, with one mother sharing a story of how social media was used by a group of mothers to actively intervene in her period of isolation. **Opportunities for expression** *"Being in art shows and exhibiting my art I feel connected to the community."* **The natural environment** *"Going out into nature. As soon as I go out into the garden the world changes."* **Working** *"But for the most part work would be my number one social network."* **Faith based groups** *"We found a church about 15 minutes away which we go to on a Sunday and so that has enabled us to meet some people of the same religion."*	**Social media and technology** Although they talked about the impact of social media and online communication for social connectedness, young people also identified meeting people and beginning relationships with online as an enabler for overcoming social isolation and loneliness.

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Assets Map

Programs & Services Accessed by the Community Participants

Inner South-East Metropolitan Region

"I really enjoyed it because I got to get involved and do things. This year we planned an event and I just felt really inspired because I was just helping out and doing stuff."

"It's easy [to be connected to the community] … just walk down the street. There are plenty of opportunities to go shopping [and there are the] groceries, cafes, libraries and community centre."

"There is a lot of support but there's so many waiting lists that it makes it harder to access the services."

"I never found them friendly when I got there. No one ever said hi or told me what to do."

CENTRAL MELBOURNE

KEY

- Assets named by young people
- Assets named by stay-at-home mothers
- Assets named by older people
- Government & Public
- Private Industry
- Community & NGO
- Faith-based
- Technology

Map labels

- GATWICK HOTEL
- HEADSPACE
- SMART RECOVERY MEETINGS
- SOUTHPORT COMMUNITY HOUSING GROUP
- GREYTHORN COMMUNITY HUB
- R.M.I.T
- U3A
- NORTH KEW CLINIC
- SANDY BEACH CENTRE
- KEW MATERNAL CHILD HEALTH SERVICE
- BOROONDARA COUNCIL
- STORY TIME
- BASSCARE MEALS PROGRAM
- BOROONDARA MUM'S FACEBOOK PAGE
- MELBOURNE MUSEUM
- KEW LIBRARY
- LEGACY
- PRAHRAN LIBRARY
- 360 YOUTH RESOURCE CENTRE
- PHOENIX PARK NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE
- AUSTRALIAN BREASTFEEDING ASSOCIATION
- MINI MAESTROS
- MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY
- KEW NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE
- MELBOURNE ZOO
- STONINGTON YOUTH VOICE
- ACCESS HEALTH
- STAR HEALTH
- CARNEGIE LIBRARY
- JEWISH CARE
- ODYSSEY HOUSE
- MOTHER GOOSE SOUTH YARRA
- MORNING MELODIES SPRINGVALE
- ST KILDA LIBRARY
- EAST BENTLEIGH SENIOR CITIZENS CLUB
- HARTWELL CHURCH OF CHRIST
- SALVATION ARMY CRISIS ACCOMMODATION
- ST KILDA PCYC
- BRIGHTON LIFE SAVING CLUB
- SOCIAL SUPPORT PROGRAM AT CONNECT HEALTH
- BAYSIDE BUSINESS NETWORK
- CITY OF VOICES PROGRAM
- QUEERSPACE
- BRIGHTON LIBRARY
- BAYSIDE HOME LIBRARY DELIVERY PROGRAM
- BAYSIDE HEALTHY AGING REFERENCE GROUP
- VOICES OF THE SOUTHSIDE
- GET OUT OF TOWN PROGRAM
- GLEN EIRA CITY HALL ARTS & CULTURE
- PORT MELBOURNE UNITING CHURCH
- HAMPTON COMMUNITY CENTRE
- HEALTHTIME PROGRAM
- SANDRINGHAM YACHT CLUB
- BIG ISSUE WOMEN'S SUBSCRIPTION ENTERPRISE
- HAMPTON LIBRARY
- SANDRINGHAM HOSPITAL VOLUNTEERING
- FRANKSTON LAWN BOWLS CLUB
- WORDS WITH FRIENDS
- TINDER
- SCRABBLE
- SKYPE
- MINUS 18
- SANDRINGHAM LIBRARY
- BAYSIDE LEADER
- CITY OF PORT PHILLIP COMMUNITY TRANSPORT SERVICES
- BAYSIDE DELIVERED MEALS PROGRAM
- BEAUMARIS SPORTS CLUB PROBUS
- ST CHAD'S ANGLICAN CHURCH
- BEAUMARIS ROTARY

NOTE: This asset map is representative only. It is not to scale or geographically accurate.

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Key insights

Insight 1: Social isolation and loneliness are not caused by one event, but by multiple factors in someone's life. This makes it harder to avoid and address

The stories of community members demonstrated that people's experiences of social isolation and loneliness are complex, unpredictable and often influenced by the multiple overlapping factors such as race, class and gender (also known as intersectionality).

Although these consultations were grouped according to demographics, cross cutting themes included addiction, living with disability, having experienced mental health struggles and coming from migrant backgrounds. One stay at home mother identified as a woman of colour and having recently moved interstate. An older man identified himself as having recently retired and now living with severe deafness. A young person identified themselves as having recently moved out of crisis accommodation and recovering from substance abuse.

> "I wanted to become an Australian citizen to feel secure and safe where I am. And I was privileged I thought, having [a European] background… I had to wait two years in a line on top of staying at home. Those were the two worst years of my life."
>
> - A stay at home mother discussing her experience as a migrant to Australia

In addition to the intersectionality of community participants, stories of connectedness to community were riddled with change. Some participants identified episodic social isolation following the death of a family member or an injury. Others identified chronic social isolation resulting from a restrictive schedule throughout their working life or from living with a disability. No one story played out the same way.

These complex and intersectional circumstances underlying people's experiences of social isolation and loneliness mean that providing services to support them is challenging. Where programs and services fail to cater to the cultural nuances between people, they may be considered inappropriate and that they do not apply to the user - a view shared by stay at home mothers and young people in the consultations.

Service provider insights

Every individual is different and will access services in different ways with different specialist areas. However, factors such as limited opportunities to secure funding encourage a level of competitiveness between service providers to demonstrate outcomes, which limits cooperation between service providers. This issue and the service system is very complicated and therefore service providers need spaces to get together and work together on providing support and developing solutions.

Opportunity

How might we stimulate greater cross-service collaboration where the varied needs of individuals are at the centre of service provision?

Insight 2: Social media and technology have a huge role to play in connecting and disconnecting people from their community

> "A group of women started a WhatsApp group from January onwards when it was quite a tough time for me to try and stay connected and keep me connected with them."
>
> - A stay at home mother talking about how social media helped her stay connected during her struggle with addiction

Social media and technology were cross cutting themes for all demographics. Amongst older people, stay at home mothers and young people, social media and technology acted as causes, barriers to and enablers of overcoming social isolation and loneliness.

One older person described social media and technology as instrumental to maintaining her relationship with family, with regular games of online Scrabble and Words with Friends as well as frequent Skype calls with her daughter. By contrast, an older person said he could not afford a computer and that he struggled to learn how to use technology. Many stay at home mothers said that social media helped to connect them to their community, by introducing them to programs and services as well as by providing a platform on which their support networks could reach them.

Young people had a similar relationship with social media and technology to that of older people, identifying increasing online communication as a cause of social isolation and loneliness but also acknowledging that it enabled them to form online friendships and relationships that overcome the very same issues.

The community consultations demonstrated the power of social media and technology while also highlighting the things to consider in an increasingly digitised space.

Service provider insights

How people find out about services frequently comes down to someone having the time to sit down with them and show them where to look. It also comes down to having access to the Internet in the first place. The internet has become such a complex place to navigate, difficult to know what is legitimate, people are afraid of pursuing opportunities for engagement online.

Young people use social media a lot and form connections in online spaces, such as gaming chat rooms and Facebook. But do these connections provide support to the person when there is a crisis?

Opportunity

How might we harness social media and technology so that the benefits enjoyed by some people are available to everyone in the community?

INNER SOUTH-EAST METROPOLITAN PARTNERSHIP

Clear Horizon

Key insights

Insight 3: Across all three groups people have issues accessing and affording the support they need

> *"One of the things I find as an older person is that getting around as an older person in [my local government area] is very difficult because they have old trams and you have to climb the stairs. You can't even get in the new trams because there's no platforms. The only way to get around is to take the train but they aren't covered, and you have to stand in the rain if you have a scooter."*
>
> - An older person discussing access to transport in their LGA

Accessibility and affordability were the most common reasons for feeling disconnected from one's community.

Accessibility as a barrier

Older people spoke about inadequate transport options, like a lack of community buses or volunteer transport programs, as well as inaccessible public transport infrastructure, such as having no elevated tram platforms in their suburbs. Similarly, stay at home mothers said that they had to travel long distances to mothers' groups and to children's programs, which often conflicted with their infants' sleep and feeding routines, making these places inaccessible.

Stay at home mother's reflections about accessibility suggest that there is a limited availability of services that appeal to them nearby, leading them to have to travel to services that are further away. Having to travel to access social spaces was an issue for stay at home mothers, young people and older people, as we show in the assets-based map (see page 17).

The decision to travel further to access programs and services can be linked to participants' views of inclusive spaces. Young people discussed feeling unwelcome in social spaces, largely as a result of adult perceptions of them, where one young person spoke about being told that she was too loud to be at a restaurant with friends.

Stay at home mothers talked about feeling too old for, or out of place at, the social opportunities available to them. By contrast, older people discussed their experience of inclusive spaces from the view of changing neighbourhoods and urban planning. One older person spoke about reduced social contact since reduced parking on her street meant that her friends were less likely to visit. Other older people talked about how increased tenancy and reduced home owner dwellings in their neighbourhood meant that they were surrounded by younger people or people from different cultural backgrounds who were less likely to engage with them.

Affordability as a barrier

The ability to afford transport and services was another barrier. This was seen across all three groups but was especially important to young people, who talked about the cost of public transport and sporting clubs as barriers to access. Young people then went on to propose that more sporting clubs and groups embed payment plans into their operations to improve young people's access to these spaces.

Service provider insights

Most services require people to leave the house to get support and require regular attendance. Often gaps in attendance can mean that support is withdrawn. There are many things that can prevent attendance at a service, including caring for young children, having a disability, mental health, lack of transport etc. There are cases of older people getting injured while boarding trams or even when getting in and out of taxis. This often makes them very reluctant to use public transport. Where people have access to transport, issues of affordability arise – accessing a community bus can cost as much as $20.

Services need to provide unconditional and flexible support in which community members can engage and disengage as needed and their circumstances allow.

Opportunity

How might we improve the accessibility and affordability of clubs, programs and services?

How might we provide unconditional and flexible services so that personal circumstances (mental health, transport etc) do not act as a barrier to people getting support when needed?

Insight 4: There are gaps in our service system for supporting people undergoing major transitions in their lives

The main causes of loneliness and social isolation identified by older people, stay at home mothers and young people were associated with significant changes in their lives.

This finding was supported by findings from the document review where the UK's Office for National Statistics (HM Government 2018, p. 20) noted that specific life events can act as triggers for loneliness; these may include such things as migration and settlement, experiencing bereavement, having children, moving home, and any major life transition. In the consultations, older people discussed changes in their connectedness to community as a result of retiring from working or from changing housing arrangements. Similarly, stay at home mothers talked about increasing social isolation and loneliness as a result of taking maternity leave from work or migrating to Melbourne away from their family and friends. Young people were the most aware of the relationship between major life transitions and feeling socially isolated or experiencing loneliness. They felt that transitioning from high school to university, and from university to a career, was isolating because there were no support services available to them that could help them deal with their changing routines and reducing proximity to their support networks.

> *"It's intimidating being in the transition."*
>
> - A young person speaking about transitioning

Service provider insights

There are gaps in supporting people through life transitions – critical points for loneliness. How people navigate these transitions are vital for building and maintaining social connections. Services also often cater to people in crisis or people seeking social connection, but how do we engage those that sit in between?

Opportunity

How might we create support systems for people undergoing a life transition?

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Looking forward

Findings in this report indicate that resolving social isolation and loneliness is complex, multi-faceted and prone to change.

The diversity of individuals who reside in the Inner South-east metropolitan region, and their changing relationships with social isolation and loneliness, suggests that tackling these require a collaborative and dynamic approach that situates the individual's traits at the centre of solution design.

Social media and technology are cross cutting themes that act as both barriers and enablers to overcoming social isolation and loneliness. There is an opportunity to harness social media and technology, by drawing on the stories of people enabled by them to redesign the experiences of others hindered by them.

Accessibility and affordability are barriers to overcoming social isolation and loneliness which indicates that government and the service system have a powerful role to play in changing the experiences of those living in the Inner South-east metropolitan region.

Finally, the gap in supporting community members – whether older people, stay at home mothers or young people – through significant transitions in their lives presents government and the service system with a clear opportunity to influence the stories of their community.

Service provider insights

There is a lot of passion in the service system to find solutions and support community members during times of vulnerability. However, due to the complexity of the issue the 'correct' approach to addressing this issue is not clear and likely involves multiple interventions working together. Therefore, we need to take a 'systems' approach to change. This means looking at all players and services in the system and working together to create better outcomes for everyone facing or at risk of social isolation or loneliness in the community.

We know the service system is very difficult to navigate and make sense of and therefore it could also benefit to provide education at an early age to let people know that support is available as well as some guidance on how to make their way through the service system to get what they need. This could be taught in schools.

Conclusion

This research showcases the stories of 30 members of Bayside, Boroondara, Glen Eira and Stonnington that bring local lived experience to the forefront of understanding social isolation and loneliness within the community. Through the narratives of older people, stay at home mothers and young people, the research highlights key insights that can inform future work to tackle social isolation and loneliness within the Inner South-East Metropolitan Region.

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