



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT

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SUBMISSION – INQUIRY into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT

Background

The community 'reach' of member organisations of the Community Sport Alliance of the ACT: 70,629 participants; 3,717 teams; 61,872 school program participants; 7,917 coaches and officials; and 180 employees (in 2022).

The Social Value of Community Sport

The value that community sport and recreation offer a community and its Government in the context of social cohesion and wellbeing is primarily through:

- **Encouraging social connectedness**, in particular by way of:
 - opportunities to contribute through volunteering.
 - providing a sense of identity for self - through being in a group/team/club.
 - providing regular opportunities for shared experiences (joys and disappointments).
- **Improving mental health** as a result of the benefits of physical activity, such as:
 - positive impact on mood, feelings of self-worth.
 - sense of improvement and self-care in undertaking physical activity.
 - setting and attaining goals.
- **Giving meaning and purpose** through engaging in an interest or recreational pursuit:
 - fosters a sense of belonging.
 - builds confidence.
 - helps provide structure and routine to daily and weekly habits.
 - encourages decision making both at individually and collaboratively through teamwork.

Comments:

We wish to address three of the Inquiry's terms of reference, i.e. c), d) and e).

c) *The personal and social costs associated with loneliness and social isolation in the ACT, including the impact of loneliness and social isolation on mental and physical health.*

Our member organisations, particularly since the pandemic, have seen increased numbers of complaints and reports of anti-social behaviour at community sporting events. We are not resourced to ascertain the reasons for this increase but it's not unreasonable to surmise that there has been an ongoing social impact from the pandemic.

This situation has meant that some sporting organisations are having to divert their limited resources to respond to an escalation of incidents rather than being able to focus on the provision of programs and competitions.

The medium and longer term impact of taking such measures is unknown, but is likely to be reflected adversely in the:

- number of participants in community development programs and local sporting competitions,
- quality of junior and youth development outcomes,
- competitiveness of ACT's junior, youth and senior representative teams.

The concern is that, if this trend continues, the nature of community sport becomes less of a place of inclusion, safety and connectedness. The potential flow-on effects include people choosing to isolate themselves from community activities, and that sporting organisations and community clubs take on the unintended burden in undertaking a greater policing role.





d) *Opportunities for the ACT Government to support organisations and individuals to address loneliness and social isolation and improve social connectedness in the ACT community.*

and

e) *Opportunities for the ACT Government to integrate improving social connectedness into other areas of policy making.*

If the narrative is about opportunities, then there is a risk of any Parliamentary or Government response focussing on a short term approach.

We would urge this Inquiry to adopt the view that emerging or existing social concerns require a long term, systemic approach with a commitment to improving and maintaining social cohesion and wellbeing.

The main principles for Government policy of social connectedness should accommodate:

- **A preparedness to invest in innovative ways** to help address this social trend towards individual isolation, including to:
 - reintroduce dedicated physical education teachers to all public primary schools. There is ample evidence of the academic, physical and mental wellbeing benefits for young people in undertaking physical activity with others.
 - ensure priority to develop and/or improve local facilities for sporting clubs that enhance social connectedness through safe and inclusive settings.
 - ensure that any greenfield residential development in the ACT includes open space and facilities for organised community sport and recreation as fundamental to urban planning. This is an important element to the liveability, sustainability and connection of a community.
 - provide greater recognition to the role of volunteers in the community, of sporting organisations and clubs, and social community clubs in assisting with social cohesion.

- **A stronger Government focus on preventative health measures** and the role sport and recreation can play to enhance such measures, with a focus on:
 - drawing on the expertise and community networks in the community sport sector
 - properly funding preventative health measures that can better utilise, and align with, the faculty of sport and recreation in the community.
 - commitment to ensuring sport and recreation is more readily accessible to all citizens,
 - understanding and recognising the inherent value of physical activity for citizens and its positive impact on the costs to the community and Government for managing the public health budget.
 - in line with the Government commitment for equity, greater attention is needed to the impact of the costs of participation in sport in the ACT for parts of the community.
 - as an example, with the Government controlling hiring and utility charges associated with facility use there is an opportunity to moderate costs that inhibit people's chances to participate.

- **Use of the existing organisational infrastructure** available across the not-for-profit (NFP) sector
 - with myriad sporting organisations and community clubs across all districts of Canberra, there is an existing network of access points for people to get involved in sport and recreation.
 - the agility and proximity of sporting organisations offer readily available opportunities for social interaction and engagement.
 - this existing people-based infrastructure can provide scope for short term initiatives as well as provide an important element for longer term policy and program initiatives.





Concluding Comments

Committee recommendations should be emphasising preventative measures as the primary focus of any Government response to the issues of loneliness and social isolation.

Sport and recreation in the ACT are invariably viewed through a narrow prism of community based activities – a case in point is the Government’s Wellbeing Indicators, where community sport is limited to social connection rather than through a broader recognition of its value to health, education and personal wellbeing, as well as community cohesion. It is also important to recognise the contribution of community sport through its economic value and impact.

This wider role needs to be embraced in terms of how the holistic relationship of sport, education, and preventative health can assist social cohesion and wellbeing.

- hitherto, the ACT Government’s recent banning of mobile phones in public schools is an important example and initiative in striving for better social connection and interpersonal skills among young people. But what other policies are in place to support this bold initiative? What about having a stronger policy emphasis on physical activity at every school setting?

In addition, Government should consider how it sets public policy and the role it has in facilitating and supporting, rather than overly regulating, the role that the NFP sector and community sporting organisations fulfil in the Canberra community.

There is plentiful research on the benefits that sport, recreation and physical activity can provide to the mental and physical health of citizens. Similarly, there are examples of sports providing mental health support programs, often in partnership with NFP mental health organisations. We would be willing to provide further detail and links to some of this pertinent information if the Committee wishes to seek further affirmation of our submission.

Yours sincerely



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Executive Officer

on behalf of members of the Community Sport Alliance of the ACT

Cricket ACT & Chair of Community Sport ACT – Olivia Thornton	AFL NSW/ACT – Michael Stanton
Basketball ACT – Nicole Bowles	Brumbies (Community Rugby) – Craig Leseberg
Canberra Region Rugby League – Mark Vergano	Capital Football – Samantha Farrow
Hockey ACT – Rob Sheekey	Netball ACT – Sally Clark
Tennis ACT – Mark LaBrooy	

