

2.5 MONASH LONELINESS FRAMEWORK 2020 – 2025

Responsible Director: Russell Hopkins, Community Services

RECOMMENDATION

That Council endorse the Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to present the *Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025* following its endorsement as a draft at the 30 June 2020 Council meeting and subsequent three week public exhibition period (ATTACHMENT 1 – Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 - 2025).

During the three week period that the draft Framework was available online for community feedback. Council Have Your Say page received 503 webpage views and 23 detailed, rich and interrogative responses. This highlights the timeliness of this public health issue, particularly in the time of a global pandemic which requires the physical distancing and isolation of people.

This *Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025* is one of the first local government frameworks in Australia dedicated to loneliness as a public health issue. The Framework articulates Council's approach to addressing loneliness in the community with a series of recommendations to contribute to improving overall community wellbeing and social connections in Monash. It commits to prioritising the importance of fostering social health across the Monash community and facilitating social connections and community engagement.

The *Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025* will align to Council's next legislated municipal public health and wellbeing plan 2021 – 2025, where dedicated loneliness actions will be considered. This will seek to build an evidence base, which will also contribute more broadly to the sector's understanding of what works to address loneliness from a public health approach.

BACKGROUND

The last few years have seen an emergence of a global dialogue and rapid evidence-based research and literature around the topic of loneliness. Loneliness is not a new concept, but it is now recognised as a major public health epidemic of our time and that it is affecting all age groups.

PURPOSE/DISCUSSION

Loneliness as a health priority

The health implications of loneliness are significant. Loneliness increases a person's likelihood of experiencing depression, social anxiety and poor self-esteem. The long-term stress of feeling lonely has been found to trigger a response in the brain akin to physical pain and has also been linked to poor health outcomes.

The solution to loneliness

The antidote to loneliness is meaningful social connections. This framework prioritises Council's commitment to fostering social health in order to facilitate social connections and community engagement as a way of reducing loneliness.

Council's role in addressing loneliness

Given its direct and influential role on the health and wellbeing of the community, Monash Council is well-placed to address loneliness through many of its existing policies, services and community-based programs. Council also has a role as a facilitator of partnerships and community connections which build upon existing community strengths, such as grassroots community organisations, co-designed projects and programs and community cultural development.

By introducing this framework, Council is focused on the impact that loneliness has on the overall health and wellbeing of the community. This framework highlights the importance of social connections for people's health and wellbeing.

COVID-19

During the development of this framework the world has experienced an unprecedented, unique trigger for loneliness; the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic. With this in mind, the framework also captures Council's response to addressing loneliness in relation to the complex social, health and community implications of pandemics.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The *Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025* will support strategic intent for community wellbeing, as outlined in the *Monash Council Plan: 2017 – 2021*. One of the four strategic objectives stated in the Council Plan is – *An Inclusive Community: Our people and our communities are healthy, connected and engaged*. This objective outlines Council's commitment to fostering a strong community with positive social connections, which research indicates is key to reducing loneliness.

The new municipal public health and wellbeing plan 2021 – 2025 will consider loneliness as a key priority for action for Monash, which marks the first time it has been recognised as a major public health issue in Council planning. The Framework's recommendations will be considered as public health actions in the development of the next municipal public health and wellbeing plan 2021 – 2025.

Council will in the meantime take immediate action to incorporate a number of the Framework's foundational Recommendations in Year 4 of the existing *A Healthy & Resilient Monash: Integrated Plan 2017 -2021*.

The Framework is also informing Council's current approach to delivering the Department of Health & Human Services-funded Community Connector program which is specifically targeted to support people who are socially isolated as result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The Framework commits Council to prioritising the importance of fostering social health across the Monash community and facilitating social connections and community engagement.

HUMAN RIGHTS CONSIDERATIONS

The Monash Loneliness Framework supports a number of human rights considerations including an individual's right to health and wellbeing, equity, access and inclusion and intersectionality.

CONSULTATION

PUBLIC EXHIBITION PERIOD

The draft Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025 was endorsed at the Monash Council meeting of 30 June 2020. It then opened for public exhibition for a period of three weeks from 2 July 2020 – 29 July 2020 through Council's 'Have Your Say' webpage.

Through the public exhibition process, members of the public were invited to read and respond to the Framework. Two key questions were asked along with a request for optional demographic information.

The two questions asked were:

- 1) Do you think this Framework hits the mark?
- 2) Is there anything else that Council should consider about the impact of loneliness in our community that should be included in the final Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025?

Engagement

During this three week period, the webpage dedicated to the draft Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025 received 503 page views and 419 unique page views. The high level of engagement supports Council's pursuit of loneliness as a major public health focus in the coming years.

Monash is one of the first Councils in Australia to develop and publish a dedicated Loneliness Framework. There is yet to be a national or State strategy dedicated to loneliness. As a result of this, the draft *Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025*, was circulated amongst many local government sector and community health networks. This meant Council received a significant number of responses from partner agencies in the Melbourne metropolitan region, as well as feedback from members of the public living outside of Monash, including regional NSW.

Feedback – overall themes

Of the 419 unique page views, Council received a total of 23 detailed feedback responses to the draft Framework. A table of the feedback and Council's response is attached. (ATTACHMENT 2 – Public Exhibition Feedback and Council Response Summary Table).

This feedback has been considered and informed the final version of the Framework. Respondents who provided their contact details will receive a final copy of the Framework.

The overall themes provided to Council were:

- Anecdotal experiences of loneliness.
- General positivity about Council developing this Framework to address loneliness.
- The important of building the evidence to prevent and/or respond to loneliness in the community.
- The importance of online communities and Council programs, events and services being offered in an online platform in the current COVID-19 environment.
- The requirement for Council to tailor its response to loneliness based on specific cohorts of the community including young people, elderly, people with autism, carers, busy and single parents, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, people's gender and sexual orientation identities and connecting through culture.
- Validation of an intersectional approach to loneliness required based on the complex and rich make-up of people's identities and experiences.
- The role societal discrimination and barriers contribute to increasing a person's loneliness.
- An interest in the actions that Council will develop to address, measure and evaluate loneliness in the Monash community through its upcoming municipal public health and wellbeing plan 2021 – 2025.

Feedback integrated into final version of the Framework

Based on the feedback, the following amendments have been incorporated:

- Graphic design version and infographic: during the public exhibition period, the community were provided a Word-only version, the final version has been graphically designed with the inclusion of an infographic developed by artist Sarah Firth
- Section 6 'Why are we so lonely?'
 - Discrimination has been included as an additional risk and reason for loneliness.
 - The statistics on lone person households in Monash have been included; 12,288 (18.9% of households).
- Section 7 'How do we address Loneliness?'
 - 'Places of Worship' and 'Art Galleries' have been included as third spaces that assist in community social connections.
 - 'Accessibility' has been added to the ways we address loneliness.
 - 'Recognising cultural diversity and supporting free cultural expression, respectful of all cultural identities, as a foundation for social cohesion and connection' has been added to the ways we address loneliness.
 - Increased opportunities for online and digital communities and ways for people to connect and engage have been incorporated.
- Section 9 'What has the community told us about loneliness?'
 - Inclusion of specific societal barriers that may exacerbate a person's experience of loneliness.
 - The role of people who are not lonely.
 - The intersectional approach and the importance of identifying and removing barriers which exist for people who have complex identities and experiences has been strengthened.
- Section 11 'Framework context'

- Strengthened the explanation of the strategic link between the Framework and the Council Plan.

Demographic breakdown

Council received a total of 23 detailed feedback responses to the draft Framework. Below is a breakdown of the respondents' demographic profile:

Gender

Female: 20

Male: 3

Age

Ages ranged from 21 – 86 years old

Location

Monash residents

Ashwood: 1

Chadstone: 1

Clayton: 2

Glen Waverley: 1

Hughesdale: 2

Mount Waverley: 6

Mulgrave: 1

Wheelers Hill: 2

Non-residents-

Monash Council staff: 2

West Melbourne: 1

Partner agencies in the region: 3

NSW: 1

Cultural background

Respondents identified as having a range of cultural backgrounds including Anglo-Australian, European, Chinese and Indian.

CONSULTATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FRAMEWORK

In the development of this framework between January and April 2020, Council undertook several consultation activities both in-person and online due to COVID-19 adjustments. Consultation took place with stakeholders including members of Council's Advisory Committees, community partner agencies and members of the general public. These same participants were invited to respond to the finalised draft framework online.

With the recent introduction of the Victorian Gender Equality Bill, Council took the opportunity to develop this framework using a practical application of gender impact analysis tools. The questions asked during this consultation process sought to understand how gender relates to the experience of loneliness, and the consequences of this on our community.

The feedback received across all consultation activities enabled a better understanding of the following aspects:

- Current prevalence of loneliness within the Monash community
- Which cohorts are experiencing loneliness most acutely
- What current strategies are in place to address loneliness
- Where Council should focus its work to address loneliness

Officers also consulted VicHealth directly, to ensure alignment with the Victorian State Government's own public health approach to addressing loneliness.

Three main themes became apparent through Council's consultation process. These themes are listed below and are detailed in the attached Framework document [see ATTACHMENT 1]:

- Addressing loneliness requires an intersectional approach.
- Monash already has a network of strong community activity to prevent and respond to loneliness.
- People experiencing chronic loneliness are difficult to reach.

For more information, please refer to ATTACHMENT 3 - Survey Questions Development of Framework & Public Exhibition Period.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The recommendations of the *Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025* will be delivered within existing resources.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this framework is to inform Council's position on loneliness and commitment to improving the overall health, wellbeing and social connections of the Monash community.

The community's high level of engagement (503 webpage views and 23 detailed responses) with the draft Framework in the three week period it was available to the public online highlights the relevance of this public health issue. Community feedback is reflected in this final version.

The Framework will inform dedicated loneliness actions considered in the development of the next municipal public health and wellbeing plan 2021 – 2025. This will build the evidence-base for population-level interventions which prove successful in addressing loneliness.

It is recommended that Council endorse this framework.

ATTACHMENTS

ATTACHMENT 1 – Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025 Final Version

ATTACHMENT 2 – Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025 - Public Exhibition Feedback

ATTACHMENT 3 – Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025 – Consultation Questions