2.1   DRAFT MONASH LONELINESS FRAMEWORK 2020 – 2025

Responsible Director: Russell Hopkins, Community Services

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to introduce Council's new *Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025* (draft).

KEY CONSIDERATIONS/ISSUES

The draft 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.

This framework will commit 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* (draft) will align to Council's next legislated municipal public health and wellbeing plan 2021 – 2025, where dedicated loneliness actions will be embedded, implemented and evaluated.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATION

That the draft framework be released for public comment immediately for a period of three (3) weeks with the finalised framework submitted to August Council meeting for consideration.

2.1 DRAFT MONASH LONELINESS FRAMEWORK 2020 – 2025

Responsible Director: Russell Hopkins, Community Services

RECOMMENDATION

That Council endorses the release of the Draft Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025 for public comment for a period of three (3) weeks.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to outline Council's new *Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025* (draft).

This *Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025* (draft) represents a series of 'firsts'. It is one of the first local government frameworks in Australia dedicated to loneliness, which is now considered a major public health priority affecting all age groups. It is also one of Council's first documents that has had the Victorian Gender Equality Bill's gender impact analysis tool applied through its development and consultation process. Significantly, it has been developed in the context of a global pandemic, which will have deep implications for the way that Council responds to the community's experiences of loneliness.

It is intended that this draft framework will be released for public comment for a period of three (3) weeks, pending Council's endorsement, with the finalised framework submitted to the August Council meeting for consideration.

BACKGROUND

The last few years has 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.

A 2015 VicHealth survey found that loneliness can affect people at any point, but it is particularly common among two key groups: older individuals aged 75 and above and young people aged 16 – 25. In the survey one in eight young people aged 16 – 25 reported a 'very high intensity of loneliness.'

Research indicates that there are also certain *life events* that can make people more likely to feel lonely. These life events are often 'transition points' where circumstances relating to a person's relationships and social support networks are impacted, making them more vulnerable to loneliness. An illustration of the common life stage triggers for loneliness is demonstrated in ATTACHMENT 1 *(Illustration Life Triggers Loneliness – UK Strategy 2018).*

On 18 May 2020, the Australian Bureau of Statistics released its third Household Impacts of COVID-19 survey results and found that the most commonly experienced personal stressor due

to COVID-19 was **loneliness** (22%), with women more likely to report feeling lonely than men (28% compared with 16%).

PURPOSE/DISCUSSION

During the development of this framework the world has experienced an unprecedented, unique trigger for loneliness; the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic. Loneliness was recognised as a far-reaching problem prior to the 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 COVID-19.

Council's role in addressing loneliness
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.

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.

Loneliness as a health priority
The health implications of loneliness are stark and far-reaching. Loneliness significantly 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 ill health outcomes.

Loneliness and the impact that it can have on social integration and social support increases the risk of early death, more so than poor diet, obesity, alcohol consumption, and lack of exercise. Research shows that it can be as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

The solution to loneliness
The antidote to loneliness is meaningful social connection. VicHealth states that 'the most effective way to reduce loneliness is to make people feel connected to their community.' *Social health* is now being recognised as a fundamental predictor of overall health and wellbeing. So much so that the World Health Organisation has now included *social connections* as a key determinant of health.

This framework will prioritise Council's actions towards fostering social health in order to facilitate social connections and community engagement as a way of reducing loneliness.

The impact of COVID-19 on loneliness
Loneliness was recognised as a pressing social and public health issue prior to COVID-19, but the restrictions that the public have been required to observe, particularly for those who are already vulnerable such as the elderly, has intensifying feelings of loneliness and deepening separation from others.

The *Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025* (draft) will align to Council's next legislated municipal public health and wellbeing plan 2021 – 2025, where dedicated loneliness actions will be embedded, implemented and evaluated.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This framework aligns to Council's legislated role in improving the health and wellbeing of the Monash community. Its recommendations will be implemented, measured and evaluated as actions executed through the next municipal public health and wellbeing plan 2021 – 2025.

The Monash Loneliness Framework has been drafted to include a number of recommendations, detailed within ATTACHMENT 1.

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this framework is to frame Council's approach to addressing loneliness in the community and contribute to improving overall community wellbeing and social connections in Monash. It 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.

Addressing loneliness by fostering social connections supports a human right to meaningful and supportive relationships and social structures that recognises people's humanity and worth. This framework seeks to improve overall wellbeing without discrimination.

The following principles provide a strong human rights framework to guide Council to implement this framework.

Equity: We provide or enable services and supports to everyone, but especially for those who are most vulnerable.

Access & Inclusion: We will remove or reduce barriers to participation by ensuring that information, services and facilities are accessible to people of all abilities and circumstances.

Intersectionality: We recognise that people's lives are multi-dimensional and complex and therefore our response to community issues cannot be developed through a singular lens.

CONSULTATION

In the development of this framework, 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.

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 assisted Council to better understand 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

Four main consultation activities were undertaken between January and April 2020.
- Council Staff Consultation
   o Community Strengthening team workshop
   o Cross Divisional Staff Consultation Workshop – 36 x staff across 7 x departments
   o Children Youth & Family Service Leadership Team Consultation
- Community Consultation Activity at Clayton Festival – Approximately 120 x community members provided feedback
- Survey of Local Stakeholder Organisation – 12 organisations responded
- Survey of Council Advisory Committee Members – 17 committee members responded.

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 [ATTACHMENT 2]:
- 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.

It is intended that this draft framework will be released for public comment for a period of three (3) weeks and the finalised framework submitted to the August Council meeting for consideration.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

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

CONCLUSION

Loneliness is now recognised as a leading public health priority. While loneliness affects people individually it can also have a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of the community as a whole. VicHealth states that 'the most effective way to reduce loneliness is to make people feel connected to their community.'

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.

It is recommended that Council endorse this draft framework with the intention of releasing it for public comment, and for a final version to be considered at the August 2020 Council meeting.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 – Draft Monash Loneliness Framework 2020 – 2025

Attachment 2 – Loneliness Infographic