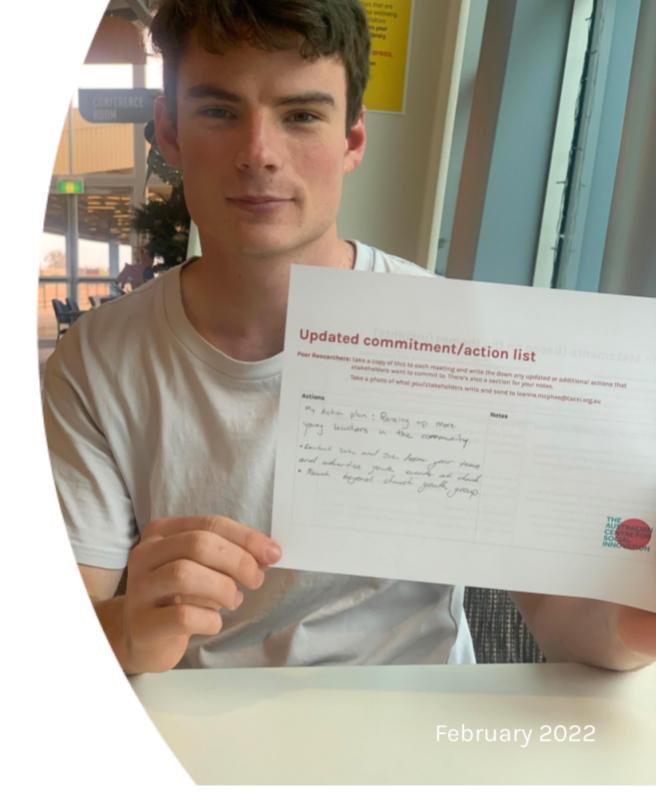


Youth Connection Project

# Report on the Themes and Opportunity Areas for Action

Prepared for the Department of Human Services, Office for Recreation, Sport and Racing and Wellbeing SA.





We acknowledge the traditional custodians and owners of the lands in which we work and live on across Australia. We pay our respects to Elders of the past, present and emerging. We are committed to collaboration that furthers self-determination and creates a better future for all.

We acknowledge the world is changing and that all of the challenges facing our society will be more deeply felt by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Embedding a cultural lens across all of our work must be a priority in any strategy that is created and implemented.



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#### 1. Introduction

The purpose of this project was for diverse young people living in Port Augusta and Port Pirie to identify, through a co-design process with service providers, opportunities that can create meaningful connections for young people experiencing social isolation and loneliness.

To achieve this purpose the project set out to understand:

- What meaningful connection, social isolation and loneliness mean for young people (from the perspective of young people and service providers)?
- 2. What contributes to youth social isolation and loneliness?
- 3. What factors, including community resources and assets can, contribute to improving meaningful social connections for young people?

These questions formed the key lines of enquiry for the project.

The Department of Human Services (DHS), the Office for Recreation, Sport and Racing, (ORSR) and Wellbeing SA (WBSA) engaged The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) to:

- Design and implement a discovery research process with four Peer Researchers (young people aged 18-25) to achieve the project purpose (output 1).
- 2. Capture what is learned by applying a discovery/co-design approach in two regional towns and how this could be translated to other regional settings (outputs 2 and 3).

The outputs produced by the Peer Researchers and TACSI include:

- A report documenting the themes, insights relating to youth connection, social isolation and loneliness and the opportunity areas for action.
- 2. A Vlog (video) and Blog (written) that document the 'capture as we

- go' perspective and experiences of the Peer Researchers involved in conducting the project.
- 3. Clear Horizon, evaluation specialists, was engaged by TACSI to document and evaluate the process, and capture the learnings for this project. Please refer to the report: Youth Connection Project Evaluation Report.

#### This report shares the:

- Project methodology that shows the approach to working with and supporting the Peer Researchers, and to implement the project
- Themes that provide insight into the three key questions that formed the lines of enquiry for the discovery research process
- Opportunity areas for action that can address the conditions that hold youth social isolation and loneliness in place.

## 2. Approach to discovery research and co-design

A discovery research and co-design approach was implemented for this project. As shown in Diagram 1 (over page), discovery research is the first step of the co-design process that enables us to use generative techniques to test assumptions and unpack the 'unknowns'. Information and data collected is then collated, synthesised into themes and/or insights that enable us to identify opportunity areas where action can be taken as part of the next stage in the co-design process.

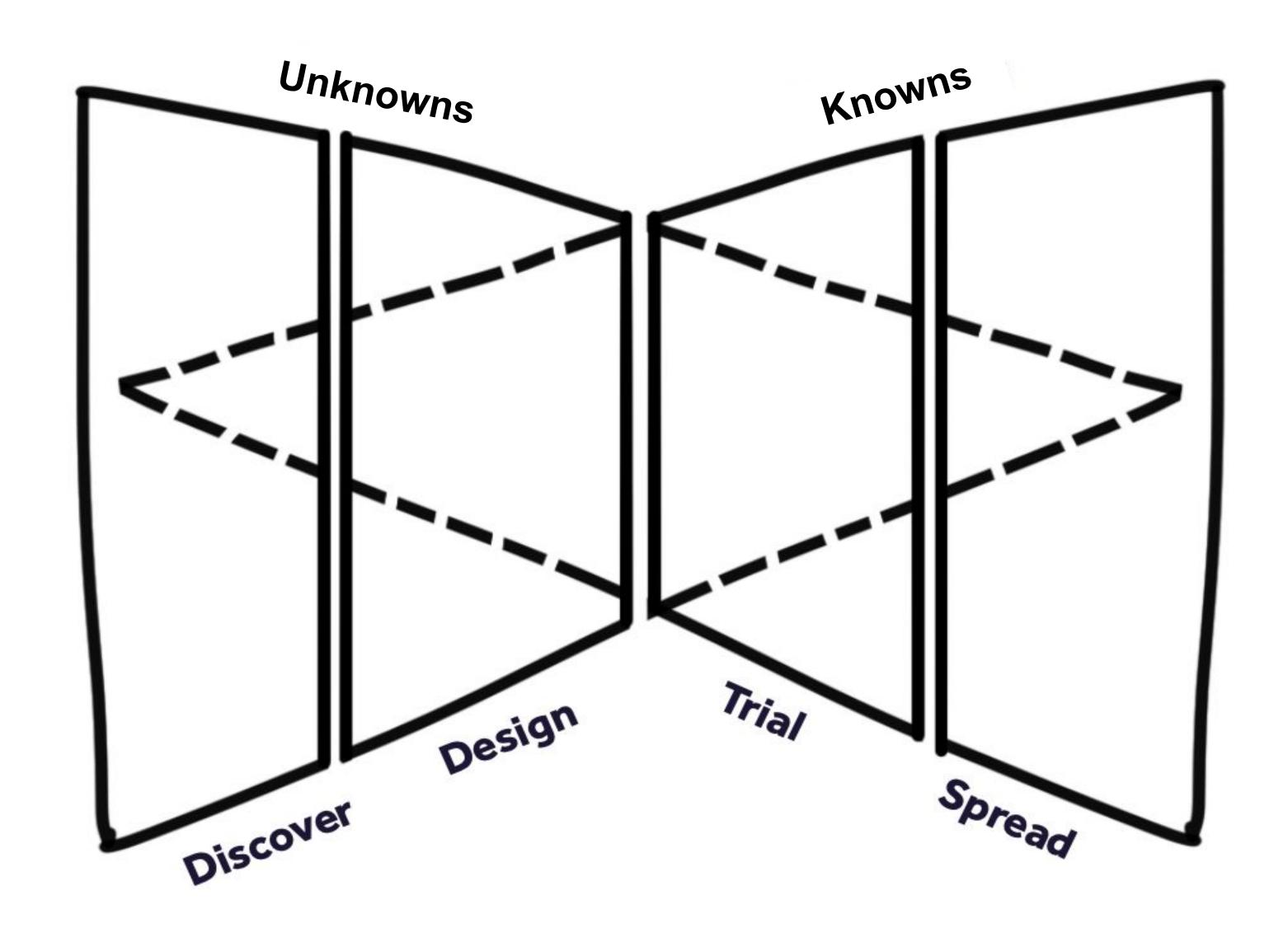
Discovery research using a co-design approach is different from traditional research as it:

- Uses a smaller sample size. Instead of validating facts we want to understand the 'why' or reasoning behind an issue or problem that continues to hold it in place
- Develops knowledge that is relevant to the specific context we are working on
- Considers and builds on three types of evidence: lived experience knowledge, literature or 'traditional research', professional/practice experience

The discovery research process implemented for this project was based on the co-design mindsets outlined in Diagram Three.

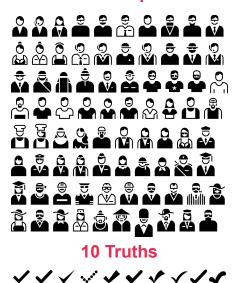
The project methodology in Attachment One outlines the approach to work with and support the Peer Researchers, and to implement the project. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the project team delivered training for the Peer Researchers on-line, rather than in community. Across the project stages, communication with the Peer Researchers also occurred via email and a Facebook Messenger Group.

## The co-design journey



#### 'Traditional' Research

#### 100 People



Do people prefer to be contacted by phone or online?

## Working with Lived Experience

10 People



100 Insights



How do people make sense of the service in the context of their lives?

# Co-design mindsets



## Overview of the Themes and Opportunity Areas for Action

Themes
What contributes to
youth social isolation
and loneliness?

People not noticing us struggling and withdrawing

Not having money to participate

Domestic violence, family breakdown and homelessness

Struggles with mental health

Not knowing who to reach out to and who can help

Themes
What could improve
youth social
connection?

Support that is flexible to suit our different needs

A better range of activities on offer

Services that are better connected within the community

Understanding the system and knowing what's available

**Opportunity Areas** for Action

Invest in building the capability of key stakeholders to notice and act when young people become socially withdrawn

Work with the towns to co-design and prototype (test, learn, iterate) mental health access options with young people

Invest in Impact Networks to tackle the conditions that hold youth social isolation and loneliness in place

Support the development of safe spaces for all young people

Incentivise towns to implement a community-led prototype space to host activities

Encourage the development of sponsorship programs to support youth connection and participation in diverse activities

#### **Themes**

The following themes are presented under the key questions that formed the lines of enquiry for the discovery research.

These are written as presented by the Peer Researchers using 'we' 'us'.

## What does social connection and isolation mean to young people?

For young people and stakeholders, social connection is about forming a bond or connection with friends, family and community.

Social connection is a two way street - it's about feeling safe with people to tell our story, and listening to other people's stories. Social connection is about:

- Healthy relationships
- Connecting face-to-face with people
- Having people around us who are there to listen and understand; and
- Is much stronger when young people meet with people in person.

Social isolation for young people can look like:

- Shutting ourselves off from people
- Not having strong relationships
- Not feeling safe to be ourselves or seek support
- Feeling like we have nothing in common with people.

Through the interviews conducted the people and groups who more often experience social isolation and loneliness include:

- Young people not living at home
- Young mums
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people
- Young people living with disability
- Young people who identify as LGBTIQA+

What contributes to youth social isolation and loneliness?

## 1. People not noticing us struggling and withdrawing

We heard that teachers, parents and friends often don't notice when young people are withdrawing into themselves.

"I wish someone took notice, like somebody at school."

Young people and service providers agreed that service providers, teachers, parents and community need to be supported to recognise the early signs of young people socially withdrawing.

Feeling 'unqualified' to have a conversation or that it's taboo to do so were reasons why people didn't feel confident to have an 'early intervention' conversation with a young person.

An educative/informative approach about 'what to look for' and how to have a conversation was agreed to be a positive way forward.

#### 2. Not having money to participate

We often miss out on activities because we don't have enough money to pay for regular membership or activities e.g. sport, theatre, dance, the swimming pool.

"Most things to do cost money. We need more free activities so people like me don't feel excluded."

This was the biggest theme that came out of the interviews we did with young people and stakeholders.

In Port Pirie, young people and stakeholders talked about the socio-economic divide that exists in the community.

There are a lot of activities (mostly sport) that all cost money to participate in.

#### 3. Struggles with mental health

Stress and anxiety can make us withdraw from friends and family and become reluctant to connect with people. This can get more intense for those of us exploring our identity.

"It's difficult to stay connected with friends and not drift away from people when you're going through personal things, and are anxious and stressed."

Most young people we spoke to had experienced really stressful situations (e.g. loss of a parent, domestic violence, homelessness, family breakdown) and on-going stress and anxiety.

They often felt like they'd been judged and didn't always feel comfortable telling people about their situation. Dealing with people's judgements about who we are, what we're experiencing and if we are poor is a real load and something we all experience.

"There is so much judgement in our community. People aren't aware of how heavily this affects mental health."

Many young people found counselling too formal and intimidating. Stakeholders had heard this too. Young people and stakeholders believed that other types of mental health

support needs to be available for young people, in addition to counselling. Not every situation needs to be case managed.

In Port Pirie, service providers shared that mental health issues were 'accumulative'. Rather than going to counselling, young people who had fallen through the cracks were often presenting at the emergency room later down the track.

Experiences of stress and anxiety get more intense for those of us exploring our identity. Having spaces that we call safe are important to help us meet other people who are also exploring who they are, or who are 'coming out'. But it's not just about having a physical space such as a youth centre, it's any space where a conversation can be had with someone you can trust or who has lived experience.

Stakeholders and young people agreed that mental health care responses often come from a 'fix it' mentality and a deficit perspective. There is an opportunity for service providers and school counsellors to come from a strengths perspective when dealing with mental health situations.

## 4. Domestic violence, family breakdown and homelessness

These situations make young people more vulnerable to social isolation.

Sometimes we don't want our friends to know about our situation, because we are embarrassed, we need to stay safe, and we need to manage our anxiety.

Any of these situations can lead to, or intensify, social isolation - from family, school, friends and community.

Stakeholders were interested in understanding how they can work together to better understand:

- The depth of these issues
- Their impact on social isolation
- How, as a community, they can respond.

## 5. Not knowing who to reach out to and who can help

We want to know who we can feel safe to see and talk to about our problems.

"There is not enough support out there for young women in Port Augusta."

Young people said they don't know who to reach out to and how to get in contact. We need to know who can be contacted and for what. This needs to be clearer and more accessible.

"Headspace was helpful but too far to travel to.

I had to take days off from school to even go."

What can improve youth social connection?

## 6. Support that is flexible to suit our different needs

How support is offered can improve young people's connectivity and wellbeing. While we heard that a 'couch session' or sitting in an office with a counsellor didn't suit everyone, young people and stakeholders offered a number of alternatives to meet our different needs.

#### These include:

- Creating a way for us to drop in to see a school counsellor
- A 5 minute check-in online with a counsellor
- Having a conversation via text with a counsellor
- Having a chat with someone we feel comfortable with who can point us in the right direction
- Providing support in different ways that can help us to:
  - Get onto issues quicker
  - Improve how we access support
  - Help us to better connect with others.

#### 7. A better range of activities on offer

"Having a LGBTIQA+ group would help us feel accepted and that we belong in community."

Sport is great and available in both towns, but we need activities that reflect our diverse needs that we can participate in. Young people are interested in dancing, going to the pool, theatre, gaming, hanging out and learning from each other. Activities need to meet our diverse needs.

There's a gap in activities for young mums who are understanding their new role, and for young women, particularly in Port Augusta.

Activities specific to Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse communities or LGBTIQA+ people were emphasised as needed in both towns.

Young people need options that:

- Provide safety and support our physical and mental health needs
- Support us to explore our identity
- Help those of us who identify as Aboriginal and Torres
   Strait Islander and want to learn about and connect to
   Culture
- Help us connect with young people with similar

interests.

## 8. Services that are better connected within the community

We need to know where to find other people doing similar things to us, and what's available. We heard that a lot of services need updating to reflect current needs and wants. Advertising is one simple approach that services can take, but ...

"services need to get into the community and get connected with schools, young people and their families."

Services need to join-up and collaborate to look at what's causing youth social isolation and loneliness and keeping it that way. Rather than just looking at the problem and jumping to a solution, look at what's holding the problem in place. There's an opportunity to:

- Use authentic co-design¹ to work with us to further explore and work out what will help to create good social connections
- Work alongside us to look at the activities and supports that will actually work for us.

## 9. Understanding the system and knowing what's available

When we're socially isolated, we may not know what activities or supports are out there for us.

We can't access what we don't know about or what's not available (e.g. LGBTIQA+ or disability specific activities, spaces).

"Youth theatre is great and I love it. For so long I wanted to join but just didn't know how."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> McKercher, Kelly Ann. https://www.beyondstickynotes.com/what-is-codesign

# Opportunity areas for action to support youth connection

The opportunity areas for action are written for the Department of Human Services, Office for Recreation, Sport and Racing and Wellbeing SA as the key audience. The opportunity areas for action were developed after the synthesis and analysis of content from the interviews and co-design workshops that the Peer Researchers conducted with young people and service providers in the two towns.

#### 1. Invest in building the capability of key stakeholders to notice and act when young people become socially withdrawn

Package and offer training to service providers (including sporting clubs, educators and volunteers), that work with or have a connection to young people, that will make them feel confident about how to have an early intervention/ prevention conversation with a young person.

Building their capability to have a conversation early on can prevent a young person from becoming socially withdrawn and disconnected.

A co-designed approach with young people and key stakeholders can ensure the training takes a 'how can we help you' rather than a 'how can we fix you' approach. Consider making this training part of a funding agreement and look at program delivery examples, such as Mental Health First Aid Training, that focuses on role playing

conversations. Training could be delivered in regional areas by a team of trainers/people with lived experience.

#### 2. Work with the towns to co-design and prototype (test, learn, iterate) mental health access options with young people

Connect and convene young people and services (e.g. mental health, health, education, youth development) to co-design and safely test (prototype) flexible forms of mental health support that will improve young people's access to the right support for them.

This could involve exploring the different types of support recommended by young people to improve their connectivity and wellbeing by testing the ideas through role playing to determine service flow and a short trialling period to test and iterate. Some initial ideas from young people for different types of support included:

- Creating a drop in option to see a school counsellor
- A 5 minute check-in online with a counsellor
- Having a conversation via text with a counsellor

Creating connecting referral pathways between different services (similar to No Wrong Door approach) could also be co-designed and prototyped to improve access for young people and avoid circumstances where young people 'fall

through the gaps'.

It is important for commissioning bodies (DHS, WBSA, ORSR and others) to create funding conditions that enable services the flexibility to respond to requests for support from young people and to make referrals. Currently, some services believe they cannot act because their funding agreements prevent them from responding to certain cohorts. For example, not being able to respond to or refer a young person outside of the age group listed in a funding agreement.

## 3. Invest in Impact Networks to tackle the conditions that hold youth social isolation and loneliness in place

Investigate and invest in the development and facilitation of Impact Networks in each town. Each network would take a coordinated and action-orientated response to local issues and opportunities that respond to youth social isolation and loneliness, and generate outcomes to improve youth connection.

Impact networks engage diverse individuals, organisations and institutions to develop innovative strategies and actions to shift the conditions that hold a problem in place. An impact network is about understanding the problem and where it sits in the system, and identifying and aligning on

actions that can be taken as a collective to improve outcomes.

It is important that the set-up and implementation of networks consider the different contextual factors between the two towns. In Port Augusta, several stakeholders shared a willingness to understand how they could work with other stakeholders to respond to youth social isolation and loneliness, however, they believe a history of strong competition for funding and a fear of losing it hinders collaboration.

An impact network can work with stakeholders to address this by facilitating and supporting them to take the steps to identify the barriers and opportunities for collaboration and action. In Port Pirie, service providers expressed a readiness to collaborate and to understand ways to facilitate a network to share resources and information and to take direct action to improve youth connection and mental health.

The development phase of an Impact Network focuses on creating strong connections between members and supporting stakeholders to align on shared ideas and goals. There is an opportunity to build the capability of local stakeholders in the two towns, over a 6-12 month period, to set-up and facilitate their own network.

Following this phase each Impact Network could work to:

- Identify pathways for sharing resources, making referrals and increasing stakeholder and young people's access to information on available mental health supports
- Focus on co-designing with young people and stakeholders accessible and affordable activities of interest that meet the needs of the diverse young people in each town
- Seek and gain funding for youth specific activities (low/ no cost) and mental health access options that appeal to young people
- Develop health supports that are available for young people out of business hours.

## 4. Support the development of safe spaces for all young people

Invest in each town to enable them to provide local spaces and activities specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, culturally and linguistically diverse and LGBTIQA+ young people, and young people living with disability.

To experience connection to, and participate in, a community, it is important for young people to not feel alone in their experience and to see themselves represented and reflected in their community.

Spaces to access can be in existing or unused buildings and shopfronts or outside in open spaces where people can safely gather to run a cultural connection camp or beaches and parks that enable disability access (e.g. access ramps, handrails).

Physical and outdoor spaces need to signal to a diversity of young people that these spaces are safe to access. This can be achieved in various ways, including:

- Having visible flags on display that represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTIQA+ and culturally and linguistically diverse communities
- Symbolic public art on or near the space that represents young people's culture and diversity
- Peers and people with lived experience working/ volunteering in the space.

Trained support staff, similar to student support officers and social work students on placement, could be available in some spaces to recognise when young people need to have a chat, need to access support and could refer young people to the appropriate services and/or support.

#### 5. Incentivise towns to implement a community-led prototype space to host activities

Invest in a community led prototype for local communities to work with young people to set up a space to host a range of diverse activities and programs in safe and suitable unused space/s (main street recommended). These would be flexible and responsive spaces for a number of different uses. In Port Augusta, a space that matches and connects itinerant families and young people to activities would encourage (new) connections for those that come in and out of a town due to seasonal work. Another idea is for a space that provides young people aged 16 and over access to activities and passive leisure opportunities (other than the library or the youth centre which has an age restriction and cannot be accessed during school hours).

In Port Pirie, stakeholders were interested in creating a 'pop up' space in an unused shop front on the main street to offer music lessons and a practice space. There is a demand for this type of activity but currently no public place or space for young people to learn and/or rehearse music.

#### 6. Encourage the development of sponsorship programs to support youth connection and participation in diverse activities

Incentivise local government, sporting clubs, theatre companies, dance associations and other activity/ recreation based organisations to establish a sponsorship program for children and young people who are experiencing financial barriers to community participation.

It is important that families and young people are offered financial support in a non-shaming, non-judgemental way. Part of a program can involve, for example, another participating member checking in on a young person and/or family if they have not recently participated to invite them along to an activity or event (e.g. "Hi, how are you? We're having X happen next week, I/we would love it if you could to come along/ help out?").

Examples of what sponsorship needs to cover includes:

- Transport to get to and from activities and events
- Uniforms, shoes, costumes
- Entry and membership fees to participate
- Equipment purchase or hire.

#### 3. Conclusion

The issues associated with youth social isolation and loneliness are well known. This project has provided the additional lens of understanding these from the lived experience of young people, the context of two regional towns in South Australia, and identified the conditions that hold youth social isolation and loneliness in place.

The research for this project has sought to understand what contributes to youth social isolation and loneliness and what can create meaningful connections for young people. In doing this, we have worked with young people and service providers to understand the conditions within their communities and across the system that are barriers to creating change and achieving impact.

Young people not having enough money to participate, activities and supports not reflecting the diversity of young people and their needs (cultural, emotional, physical, identity), and service providers not always feeling confident to start a conversation to prevent young people from (further) withdrawing are some of the key conditions that we need to shift.

Broader conditions to consider and shift include the contextual factors specific to each town that can hinder cooperative and collaborative action, and funding

relationships between services and funders that are solely transactional rather than relational.

The opportunity areas for action present many of the levers that can shift the conditions for sustainable, long-term change, where communities - inclusive of young people (not just school aged), service providers and relevant stakeholders - have the agency, capability and support to come together to align and act to address youth social isolation and loneliness.

Part of the next steps is to work with the two towns to build their capability to lead the change and to prioritise and prototype the opportunity areas.

#### **Attachment 1: Project Methodology**

#### June/July 2021

1. Recruitment & relationship building

Recruitment process to engage four young people to train as Peer Researchers. TACSI created a value pitch and recruitment profile for local partner organisations to identify and support recruitment.

Recruitment occurred over a 6 week period. Additional Peer Researchers were recruited after two ceased participation due to work opportunities and ill-health.

4 Peer Researchers were recruited - 2 for each town.

#### July/Aug

2. Train Peer Researchers

TACSI design and facilitated training and coaching sessions with the Peer Researchers to build their discovery research skills. This included conducting interviews with generative activities, using recorders and transcribers to generate notes.. Peer Researchers participated in cultural awareness and safety training with an Aboriginal Elder and a session about evaluation, and the approach to be used for the project, with Clear Horizon. A total of 6 coaching and training sessions were completed in this stage.

#### August/Sept

#### 3. Generative interviews

Peer Researchers organised and conducted informal interviews and generative activities with young people and stakeholders in each town.

There were 3 Peer Researchers from Port Pirie and 1 from Port Augusta. A Peer Researcher from Port Pirie conducted the majority of interviews in Port Augusta after a Peer Researcher resigned due to ill-health.

TACSI conducted 3 debriefing and coaching sessions with Peer Researchers during this stage.

9 interviews in Port Pirie - 5 young people 4 stakeholder. 6 interviews in Port Augusta -4 young people 2 stakeholder.

#### September

#### 4. Synthesis and theming

TACSI held a 'synthesis jam' coaching session with the Peer Researchers to recap the process of synthesis and analysis. TACSI and the Peer Researchers read through interview transcripts and activities to collate and synthesise information.

Themes were identified that provide insight into how people define youth social isolation and loneliness; who experiences it; what contributes to it and how youth connection can be improved.

This stage constitutes the first loop of learning to inform the following stages of work.

#### **Project Methodology**

#### September

5. Recruitment for co-design workshops

An extensive recruitment campaign was implemented to invite young people and stakeholders to participate in the co-design workshops.

Decisions about a suitable number of participants (COVID-19 restrictions) and key organisations to invite were determined by DHS, ORSR, Wellbeing SA, Peer Researchers and TACSI.

A total of 53 organisations and young people were contacted via email, phone calls, 2-3 follow up calls and face-to-face invitations.

#### Sept/October

6. Co-design workshops

Two sessions were held with Peer Researchers to align on the workshop agenda, roles and to coach them to lead and present sections of the workshop they were comfortable with.

The purpose of the co-design workshops was to share and build on the themes collated from the generative interviews. Peer Researchers worked with young people and stakeholders to align the group around the current situation, discuss ideas and to make commitments for progress.

TACSI lead the first workshop in Port Augusta, with Peer Researchers presenting what was learned from the interviews and facilitate discussion around the themes. The workshop also explored a systems approach to identify and understand the conditions that hold youth social isolation in place and the opportunities areas for action.

Peer Researchers decided to lead the second workshop in Port Pirie to cover the same content with facilitation support from TACSI to run the generative activities.

Several stakeholders from the workshops committed to actions they could progress over the next 12 months.

TACSI held a debriefing session with the Peer Researchers after each workshop.

25 stakeholders and young people were invited and 8 attended in Port Augusta.

28 stakeholders and young people were invited and 9 attended in Port Pirie.

This stage constitutes the second loop of learning to inform the following stages of work.

#### **Project Methodology**

#### October

7. Refine themes, identify opportunities for action

Peer Researchers and TACSI update and refine the themes in two sessions post workshop and begin to identify emerging opportunities for action.

A session was held to prepare the slide deck and the Peer Researchers to present to DHS, ORSR and Wellbeing SA.

#### October

8. Presentation of key themes

Peer Researchers present key themes to DHS, ORSR and Wellbeing SA.

Discussion focused on the link between the peer-led research and other research happening in the youth mental health space.

#### November

9. Stakeholder check-in conversations

Peer Researchers contacted and meet with 4 (Port Augusta) and 5 (Port Pirie) stakeholders who participated in a co-design workshop.

The purpose was to check-in with service providers that made a commitment to follow up on an action and to test, validate and iterate draft opportunity areas for action.

Each session was recorded and transcripts organised by the Peer Researchers.

#### November

10. Synthesis and opportunity areas for action

TACSI held a debriefing and working session with the Peer Researcher to update the draft opportunity areas for action.

#### **Project Methodology**

#### Nov/Dec

11. Vlogs Recordings

TACSI recorded two sessions with the Peer Researchers to capture their discussion about the project. They shared their experiences, perspective on the project process and their insights and learning from being involved in the project.

#### January 2022

12. Evaluation Findings

Clear Horizon, evaluation partner, held a session with the Peer Researchers (and TACSI) to gain their feedback on the draft evaluation findings.

#### January

13. Presentation of the opportunity areas for action

TACSI held a preparation session with the Peer Researchers, who attended a meeting to presented the opportunity areas for action to DHS, ORSR and Wellbeing SA and gain feedback.

#### February

14. B/Vlog and Reporting

The outputs for the project were finalised.

Vlogs and Blogs that capture Peer Researcher's reflections on their journey. (Peer Researchers and TACSI)

Themes and opportunity areas for action report. (Peer Researchers and TACSI)

Evaluation report (evaluation and reporting conducted by Clear Horizon)



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