



Victorian Aboriginal
Children & Young
People's Alliance

Securing a Brighter Future for our Young Rainbow Mob

March 2021

The Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance (the Alliance) believes there is a pressing need for greater understanding, investment and support for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who identify as LGBTQI+, also known as young rainbow mob.

As an Alliance of 15 Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, authorised to deliver child and family services, we play a crucial role in driving change to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people. Our young rainbow mob often fall through the gaps of a services system not designed or structured to meet their needs.

This is an area of growing concern throughout the sector and the Alliance is committed to working with our stakeholders and Government partners to ensure our young rainbow mob no longer slip through the gaps and have the opportunities to grow and thrive in their communities.

Background

The 2020 Goanna survey into the sexual health of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia found that the number of young people identifying as sexually diverse is increasing¹. Despite this growth there is limited research and understanding within the sector of the unique and complex challenges

and needs of this cohort and the meaningful supports they require.

It is an area of significant under-investment from Government with only \$3 million invested in the LGBTQI community in the 2020/21 State Budget, with no funding allocated for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQI community².

This is alarming, as the available data tells us young rainbow mob are among the most vulnerable and high-risk population groups in Victoria. Already we know that Aboriginal young people are five times more likely to suicide than their non-Aboriginal peers³. We also know that LGBTQI+ people aged between 16-27 years are five times more likely to attempt suicide than the general population⁴. This means that young people who are both LGBTQI+ and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander are at an incredibly high risk.

Since the Equality portfolio was first introduced in Victoria in 2014, there has been slow and marginal progress towards the inclusion and recognition of LGBTQI+ people in Victorian Government policy and investment. In recent times the Victorian Government has embarked on the development of a *LGBTQI+ Strategy*, with a directions paper recently released for feedback. In parallel the Victorian Government is in the process of developing a *Victorian Youth Strategy*. The Alliance implores the Government to ensure these strategies are complementary and in unison, while hearing the voices and representing the interests of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and LGBTQI+ people. Additionally, each strategy needs to align with existing work, including, *Wungurilwil Gappagduir*, the *Youth Justice Strategic Plan*,



Korin Korin Balit-Djak Systems Transformation and the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework.

It is important to acknowledge the issues facing our young rainbow mob are sensitive, multifaceted, and complex. Navigating the intersection of cultural and sexual identity in a community setting where there are many intersecting factors such as religion, community views and perceptions and cultural obligations is extremely difficult for our young people. Capturing and understanding this to re-design a service system that addresses and empowers our young rainbow mob should be a sector priority.

Recommendations

Hear the Voices of Young Rainbow Mob

The Alliance encourages the inclusion of the voices of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the LGBTQI+ community at every possible opportunity from governance to service delivery. We acknowledge the complexity and intersectionality of this space and to accurately capture the experiences of young rainbow mob, we need to actively listen to their ideas and solutions. Our young rainbow mob are strong, resilient, creative, and proud; they are the experts in understanding the challenges facing their peers.

We need targeted systems and processes to ensure there are equitable opportunities for Aboriginal young people with lived experience to be heard. Building on existing Aboriginal youth advisory mechanisms is an efficient way of reaching out to rainbow mob and enabling their inclusion. Being heard can help young people to feel validated, accepted and seen for who they are. Embedding our young people in governance and decision making will enable practical and meaningful systemic changes to

achieve better outcomes for young rainbow mob and future generations.

While it is essential, we hear the voices of young rainbow mob, the burden of systemic change should not fall solely on them. It requires a whole of government approach, Aboriginal community leadership and cross-sector collaboration, with the voices of young rainbow mob at the centre.

Focus on community-controlled solutions

It is echoed throughout the sector that services designed to support LGBTQI+ people need to be specialised, community-led and run by LGBTQI+ people. The Alliance agrees these dedicated and community-controlled supports will be critical for young rainbow mob. Services of this nature can provide a safe space where our young people can explore who they are, connect with like-minded peers and have their identity affirmed and reflected in their surroundings.

These solutions will need to go beyond a Rainbow Tick accreditation, acknowledging that mainstream services will not always be best placed to deliver these services. Solutions that are led and driven by our young rainbow mob with robust support from the sector and government will be essential. ACCOs will continue to play an important role in advocacy and projecting the voices of young rainbow mob, however the extent of their involvement will vary and differ between communities and organisations. This also requires ACCOs to consider their own culturally safe accessibility for rainbow mob in their community. A one-size fits all approach across the state would not be appropriate. These solutions should be grassroots and community-led, therefore place-based and designed specifically to meet the needs of the local community and young people.



As ACCOs and as a sector we need to work closely with our young rainbow mob to consider how services are designed and delivered to best validate and reflect the diversity within this cohort and increase the visibility of their identity. We have heard from young rainbow mob that independent safe spaces, where young people can have their Aboriginality and sexual identity validated and visibly reflected in their environment, could save lives. Creating a space where young rainbow mob can access mentors to help navigate and explore their identity, while maintain their connection with their culture and community is essential. This can enable safe and supportive conversations around sexual health, exploring identity and culture and finding a balanced intersection between the two.

Ensure cultural safety in mainstream processes

As a result of extensive advocacy and grassroots campaigning from the LGBTQI+ community, there is a growing appetite in Government and the community to have policies and processes that are inclusive and targeted towards LGBTQI+ people. While this is essential progress, we need to continue to ensure this work considers the diversity within this cohort and that maintaining inclusion and safety is considered a priority.

It is our role as the Alliance to ensure these policies and processes are inclusive of Aboriginal voice and community needs and progress the government's commitment to Aboriginal self-determination. ACCOs and the Aboriginal community need to be meaningfully engaged in these processes, and cultural safety and inclusivity to be considered paramount in theory and in practice.

While recent initiatives such as the Rainbow Tick accreditation and development of the LGBTQI+ Strategy are essential and rightfully have a mainstream focus, the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives and ideas needs to be prioritised. Ensuring cultural safety in the processes associated with these initiatives will encourage greater engagement and input from young rainbow mob and Aboriginal communities. As articulated throughout this paper, engaging young rainbow mob throughout each process is critical in inciting change and achieving better outcomes for future generations.

It is through meaningful and culturally safe engagement with Aboriginal communities that we can ensure that accreditations and strategies go beyond words and are reflected in service design and delivery.

Increase investment

The Alliance welcomes the Victorian Governments recent \$1.2 million investment to revitalise the LGBTQI+ sector and support COVID-19 recovery. Investment and grant opportunities such as this are essential to maintaining the sector's viability and business continuity. However, to see improved outcomes for the LGBTQI+ community including rainbow mob, there needs to be far greater investment to support sustainable growth, empower leadership and governance and expand the delivery of services. We need strategic and long-term funding that goes beyond the Rainbow Tick accreditation and invests in grassroots and Aboriginal-led initiatives.

In addition, the Alliance sees the Victorian Government's development of an LGBTQI+ Strategy as an important opportunity to highlight the unique needs of our young rainbow mob and position the service sector to



better understand and respond to these needs. However, for a strategy to make meaningful change in our communities, it must be accompanied by funding and resources far beyond the insufficient \$3 million that was allocated to LGBTQI+ in the Victorian State Budget. The underinvestment and lack of resources dedicated to the LGBTQI+ community in Victoria has a direct correlation to the alarming data we are seeing, particularly around mental health outcomes.

Any investment in Aboriginal LGBTQI+ young people must be in line with Aboriginal self-determination and designed and implemented alongside ACCOs and young rainbow mob. Additionally, and as previously mentioned it must align with existing strategies and frameworks, designed to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people.

Enable research opportunities

“There has been an ongoing underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in research on LGBTIQ+ issues and little investigation into the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People who are LGBTIQ+. This has led to a lack of visibility of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sexuality and gender diverse population and difficulties of identifying their specific needs and formulating policies and strategies to support the health and wellbeing of this group⁵.”

To improve Victoria’s systems and process we must increase the visibility of young rainbow mob by understanding the demographic, their needs and the issues affecting their lives. The ground-breaking *Writing Themselves In 4* Report echoes a sense of urgency in identifying the needs and opportunities to support

LGBTQI+ Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people.

This project recommends investing in future research with a range of methodologies, including qualitative data to understand how intersecting experiences of stigma, as well as sources of strength, might shape the wellbeing of LGBTQI+ young people⁶. The research identifies that young people continue to experience high levels of stigma, harassment, discrimination, and abuse resulting in severe harm. We also know experiences of discrimination and harassment are a common occurrence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, causing severe harm⁷. We need to better understand the drivers of this and the impact it has on Aboriginal LGBTQI+ young people’s social and emotional wellbeing and life outcomes.

The Alliance strongly supports the work currently underway to analyse the Aboriginal specific data collected through *Writing Themselves in 4*. Working alongside ACCOs and communities throughout this process will generate a far better understanding of our young rainbow mob and create an opportunity for meaningful change and Aboriginal self-determination. Increasing visibility of young rainbow mob through this work will ensure any changes or developments in the mainstream sector are culturally safe and meaningfully inclusive of Aboriginal people.

Urgently address the social and emotional wellbeing of our young rainbow mob

While the Aboriginal-specific data from the *Writing Themselves in 4* Report is yet to be released, we already know that young rainbow mob are exposed to chronic social and emotional wellbeing concerns.



As outlined in the background section of this paper, the intersection of poorer social and emotional wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal people and the LGBTQI+ community, mean young people who identify as both are highly vulnerable. The *Writing Themselves In 4* report also found that young people in regional and remote regions are more likely to experience poorer social and emotional wellbeing than those in metropolitan areas⁸.

With the forthcoming release of the final report of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, we have an opportunity to leverage the recommendations and imbed culturally safe and LGBTQI+ inclusive reforms to our states mental health system.

The Alliance will continue to advocate for the progression of Aboriginal self-determination and ensure the needs of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people who are LGBTQI+ are recognised throughout the implementation of the recommendations. This includes advocating that any recommendations relating to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander LGBTQI+ young people be thoroughly considered and implemented alongside ACCOs and the LGBTQI+ community.

As providers of child and family services the Alliance believes it is critical, we address the increased vulnerabilities of those young rainbow mob who intersect with out-of-home care or youth justice. We know our young people are overrepresented in these systems and experience poorer life outcomes as a result⁹. For those who also identify as LGBTQI+, their vulnerabilities are severe. We as a sector need to ensure all systems and agencies supporting Aboriginal young people are inclusive and sensitive to the needs of rainbow mob, while continuing to advocate for the implementation of targeted and specialised Aboriginal LGBTQI+ services.

Conclusion

The Alliance believes there is a pressing need for increased understanding and investment to support the unique and complex needs of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who identify as LGBTQI+. Projecting the voices and lived experiences of our young rainbow mob in all areas of governance and service delivery with extensive Government and sector support, will enable community-controlled initiatives where both culture and sexual diversity are validated, visible and celebrated.



Endnotes

¹ South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute. The Goanna Survey 2. 2020

² Victorian State Government. 2020-21 State Budget. Department of Treasury and Finance. 2020

³ State of Victoria. Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, Interim Report. 2020

⁴ State of Victoria. Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, Interim Report. 2020

⁵ Hill AO, Lyons A, Jones J, McGowan I, Carman M, Parsons M, Power J, Bourne A. Writing Themselves In 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQA+ young people in Australia. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University: Melbourne. 2020

⁶ Hill AO, Lyons A, Jones J, McGowan I, Carman M, Parsons M, Power J, Bourne A. Writing Themselves In 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQA+ young

people in Australia. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University: Melbourne. 2020

⁷ Vicary, D.A., & Westerman, T.G. That's Just the Way He Is: Some Implications of Aboriginal Mental Health Beliefs, Australian e-journal for the Advancement of Mental Health, Vol 3(3). 2004

⁸ Hill AO, Lyons A, Jones J, McGowan I, Carman M, Parsons M, Power J, Bourne A. Writing Themselves In 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQA+ young people in Australia. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University: Melbourne. 2020

⁹ Australian Government. Report on Government Services, Youth Justice Services. Productivity Commission. 2021

