

Australian LGBT Support: A Virtual LGBT Support Black Hole

An overview of interviews conducted with hundreds of teachers, health professionals, homophobia-curious others and non-heterosexuals, adult and young, across the country.

FOR THE
HEAD

FIRST, the good news:

There has never been a better time to be a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) young person in rural, regional or remote (rrr) Australia. In 2010 rrr Australia boasted more LGBT and LGBT-friendly supports than at any other time.

NOW, the bad news:

“more” is a deceptive description because there weren’t that many supports to begin with a decade ago (see [Outlink](#)). There is still a glaring gap and virtual LGBT support black hole in rrr Australia.

As a result most rrr LGBT young people will not experience specific support. This was the same for every metropolitan centre. Yes, Sydney too. Of the 41 tour locations in 38 weeks, only 15 locations had specific supports for LGBT young people. Of those, 7 were metropolitan.

A rural police officer summed it up for all states and territories when she said: *“but there’s very few services for gay people out here... There is nowhere for them to go other than [our capital city]...”*

Not that there aren’t dazzling exceptions. Impressive strides have been made in the last decade or so in mainstreaming and “professionalising” young LGBT people’s support. Rural, regional and remote Australia boasts innovative LGBT supports, often boasting histories of well over a decade.

We don’t have to look far for inspiration. For example Geelong, Shepparton, Bunbury and Albany all have a long, continuing history of groupwork with LGBT young people in rrr Australia, with others starting to build similar legacies (see Geelong as an example in ‘For The Heart’).

(N.B. Although some cite the internet as a surrogate support, with great potential, in practice most LGBT young people see it falling short.)

Yet too often this work happens because of the efforts of individual workers and/or groups of LGBT young people. Relying too heavily on individuals rather than an environment, as explored in the ‘Schools’ summary report, has its consequences. Unfortunately few projects last beyond a particular worker, group of young people or funding. Regularly rrr communities talked about what “happened once” and what is now a distant memory. For example, one rural educator said an oft-heard phrase: *“It’s gone off the agenda since then...”*

Those LGBT supports, enduring or otherwise, that do exist often lack professional connections within their own rrr communities and particularly with their metropolitan capitals. At the time of writing no specific means of connection and information sharing for those working with LGBT young people exists at a national level, with only one funded state-based model operating.

Every LGBT support project reported being “overcapacity” and lacking the resources to meet the demands of their rrr communities. This held true for metropolitan centres as well.

This lack of resources, inability to meet demand and rarity of LGBT project worker longevity has taken its toll. There is a distinct case of, very understandable, LGBT “fatigue”. If left unchecked, this could lead to less LGBT safe spaces across Australia.

Overwhelmingly, LGBT people from every nook and cranny have reported a lack of LGBT safe space and it’s impact. One rural lesbian, echoed voices around the country:

“There is no cohesive gay and lesbian community [here]... There is no group... There is just not a place where you can meet people...”

Although some, especially in metropolitan centres, would like to rebrand it as “inevitable progress”, rrr LGBT people of all ages report that this very, often commercialised, “progress” comes at the cost of them not feeling safe or OK in those very spaces. As one young gay man in regional Australia responded: *“Progress?... A bunch of insecure straight men make a point of hugging and kissing their girlfriend so that everyone knows they’re not a poof... And a whole lot of straight women who have come to gawk and say, ‘ahhhh how cute’... No thanks...”*

Perhaps Progress needs a rethink. A small number of Australian-based LGBT-straight alliances show promise and a better model of working and living together.

Quick Facts

- Despite there being more LGBT supports than ever, there is still a virtual LGBT black hole in rrr Australia, even in metropolitan centres.
- Too often LGBT supports are isolated, overcapacity and under-resourced.
- Across the country LGBT people report a lack of LGBT safe spaces, with most not feeling completely safe or OK in “progressive mixed” spaces.
- For some potential LGBT stepping stones of support go to: www.thatssogay.com.au/support/

We lack
LGBT safe
spaces...

LGBT Support:

Trying to catch the deluge in a paper cup...

"Try to catch the deluge in a paper cup..."
Don't Dream It's Over, Crowded House

For once the bad, and repeated, news first: there is an enduring, glaring gap and virtual lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) support black hole in regional, rural and remote (rrr) Australia.

The good news: rrr Australia boasts innovative LGBT supports, often boasting histories of well over a decade. We don't need to look far or too hard for inspiration.

With two metropolitan exceptions, in Twenty10 and Open Doors, longer-term LGBT-specific support for young people comes from mainstream organisations. Often these projects are, through the input of LGBT workers and young people, leading the way in "mainstreaming" and "professionalising" young LGBT people's support.

In what could make sense, LGBT supports that lasted longer-term in rrr communities were driven locally by mainstream organisations rather than short-lived initiatives where metropolitan, often LGBT, organisations were funded to "go to the bush" (Uniting Care West's True Colours Project bucks this trend). Yet crucially, LGBT supports in rrr communities go best when driven locally, with some level of partnership with metropolitan LGBT organisations.

There is not an LGBT project or organisation that is not overcapacity. Twenty10, arguably the leading support organisation for LGBT young people in the country, quantified this: *"Based on our funding, we are functioning about 164% of our capacity..."*

This rare case of documenting actual vs funded capacity has very real service ramifications.

"It's partly about awareness-raising with staff... We ask, 'What is your capacity? What is Twenty10 here for?'... Because burnout has an impact on the service, the young people and yourself..."

This burnout plays itself out in the high turnover of staff in the LGBT sector. This becomes most apparent with LGBT support projects where a worker operates in isolation, and when the position is in a rrr community.

It must be repeated: **too often this work happens because of, and relies too heavily on, the efforts of individual workers and groups of LGBT young people rather than a supportive environment.**

This can become burdensome when LGBT supports operate in isolation. Often LGBT support organisations, projects and workers questioned if they were doing enough, or if more could be taken on due to the under-resourced nature of LGBT support work. All admitted they couldn't begin to address all the needs of LGBT young people, yet it didn't stop them trying. Said one LGBT support worker: *"We're not funded to do that, but..."*

Those LGBT supports, enduring or otherwise, that do exist often lack professional connections within their own rrr communities and particularly with their metropolitan capitals. One male counsellor at a regional branch of a national mental health organisation for young people was an example of what was found across Australia: *"Personally I don't know about services, like [statewide LGBT support organisation]..."*

When supports are known by the mainstream, the relationship is not necessarily based on prioritising the young LGBT person's needs: *"[Services] find out that a client is gay and because they've run out of petrol they call [us]..."*

As was found a decade ago (see Outlink), a lack of LGBT support worker connection with peers, a lack of documenting their work and a lack of sharing experiences is contributing to an evident LGBT "fatigue" (i.e. the lack of a collective, robust and vibrant energy - be it state, territory or national - around LGBT support work beyond the day-to-day tasks).

Yet a breath of fresh air seems to be coming to complement LGBT supports and counteract this "fatigue": funded LGBT support projects in mainstream organisations that build on, and work alongside, the successes of LGBT efforts. These new ideas, new people and this new energy are reinvigorating LGBT young people's support in rrr communities.

It would be too easy, and reductionist and romantic, to look only to a new generation of LGBT young people. The LGBT support "sector" has already lost too much LGBT experience and wisdom to dismiss past and current efforts of LGBT people of all ages. And those very same people, funded, supported and in partnership with skilled, educated and embracing mainstream organisations, have everything we need to fill the existing LGBT support blackhole tenfold.



Those Doing LGBT Support Work: A Snapshot

"I think it's a total cop out if people say, 'We're not a gay and lesbian organisation so we can't do the work'...I personally think it's everyone's job...You don't have to be gay or lesbian to understand the issues..."

Regional mainstream worker, NSW

Based on 'cuppa' conversations with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) support workers across regional, rural and remote (rrr) Australia, there are some clear characteristics of the individuals involved (with few exceptions).

IT'S PERSONAL

Asking workers to describe their journey to this work is a fascinating, moving and powerful experience. The road is indeed long. Grab a cuppa, listen and enjoy.

IT MEANS A LOT

This work is never just about the professional. This work has great meaning and importance in worker's lives. And this includes heterosexual allies.

BOUNDARIES ARE AN ISSUE

It's difficult to not blur the professional boundaries with the personal ones. This can have its benefits and pitfalls. Especially if they work in the very community that's also their source of connection, entertainment and support.

THEY BECOME A TARGET

LGBT support work brings a range of responses from lustful idolisation through to intense hatred, none of which should be taken personally (yet often is). Oh, and EVERYONE has an opinion for workers.

THEY'RE RESOURCEFUL

What LGBT support workers have been able to change in a climate that often lacks resources, support and opportunity is remarkable. Which can only make one salivate at the thought of what they could do collectively.

THEY'RE NOT TREATED WELL

By others or themselves. Workers rarely cited working in a healthy, supportive work environment. Nor was validation or acknowledgment forthcoming. A lack of self-care was also identified, or implied, by most workers.

THEY OFTEN UNDERESTIMATE

Not only do LGBT support workers overestimate homophobia, they tend to underestimate the ability of others to challenge and interrupt it. More importantly most underestimate their own abilities unnecessarily to meet the demands of their own work.

THEY WANT TO MARK TERRITORY

LGBT support workers are only human, and most want to put their own personal stamp on the work that they do, and that others should be doing. Sometimes this is not consistent with the available evidence.

THEY LACK PEER CONNECTION

LGBT support workers rarely have the time to meaningfully connect and share with their peers, especially face-to-face. Whilst not always possible, nothing beats a good old-fashioned cuppa.

To read more about the interviews, stories and events that informed this modern day snapshot, go to:

www.thatssogay.com.au



"It bleeds a lot...I don't work 9-4 because I'm always aware of what I can do and what could be done at all times...Technically I'm supposed to think about this job for 14 hours a week, but I'm always conscious of the seeds that I can sow...I figure out how to do things at 11pm...We have such limited funding where we try to achieve so much with so little so our personal life becomes a part of it...I know I don't know when to back off... Some of these projects don't have anyone else...I don't think I'm irreplaceable, but if I do give slack I know there is no-one to pick up the slack..."

LGBT support worker, regional Australia.

