



BUILDING OUR COMMUNITY'S
HEALTH & WELLBEING

Submission to:

**The National Conversation on the
development of the Australian
Government's National Strategy for
Young Australians.**

November 2009

About ACON

ACON (formerly known as the AIDS Council of NSW) was formed in 1985 as part of the community response to the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Australia. Today, ACON is Australia's largest community-based gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) health and HIV/AIDS organisation. ACON provides information, support and advocacy for the GLBT community and people living with or at risk of acquiring HIV, including sex workers and people who use drugs.

ACON is home to the Lesbian Gay Anti-Violence Project (AVP), the Community Support Network (CSN), the Positive Living Centre (PLC) and the Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP). ACON has its head office in Sydney as well as branches in the Illawarra, Northern Rivers, the Hunter region and the Mid North Coast.

ACON has two youth specific projects, *Fun and Esteem* working with young same-sex attracted men up to the age of 26, and the *Young Women's project* working with young same-sex attracted women up to the age of 26. These two projects use peer education to educate and support young people to improve their health through harm minimisation strategies and building personal resilience.

General Comments

ACON welcomes the move by the Government to initiate a consultation process to develop a National Strategy for Young Australians. ACON, with over 21 years of experience in working with same-sex attracted young people is pleased to be able to provide input into the consultation on the experiences of same-sex attracted young people, and illustrate why it is important for the National Strategy to be inclusive of same-sex attracted youth.

This submission will use the term same-sex attracted youth as it includes a diverse group of young people, from those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, to young people who are experiencing attraction to someone of the same sex but do not necessarily have an identity attached to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Key Issues

Discrimination and abuse against same-sex attracted youth

Same-sex attracted young people experience very high rates of discrimination and abuse in their daily lives, for simply being who they are. In a recent national study examining same-sex attracted young people in Australia, 39% of 1749 same-sex attracted respondents aged 14-21 reported that they experienced discrimination.¹

¹ L Hillier, A Turner, A Mitchell, *Writing Themselves In Again: 6 years on The 2nd national report on the sexuality, health & well-being of same sex attracted young people in Australia*, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, La Trobe University, Melbourne, (2005), p. 35.

Almost half (44%) experienced verbal abuse, and an unacceptably high proportion (15%) experienced physical abuse.² These figures are significantly higher than the general population of a similar age.³

The impact of discrimination and abuse can significantly disadvantage same-sex attracted young people in comparison to others. For example, in the NSW Attorney General's Department's report, *You Shouldn't Have to Hide to be Safe*, 46% of lesbian respondents reported that they felt 'less safe than most other women', and 65% of gay men felt less safe than most other men. For respondents aged between 20-29 years, almost three quarters reported feeling less safe.⁴

The impact of discrimination and abuse extends beyond safety issues, but also has economic, social and health impacts. The pervasiveness of homophobia can also result in same-sex attracted young people without a place that is safe and where they can be themselves. Schools, the street, on-line and at home are all sites where homophobia and abuse can occur.⁵ Such pervasive homophobia can lead to social isolation and have flow on effects – such as poorer mental health.

Inclusion of same-sex attracted youth

Towards a National Strategy for Young Australians – a discussion paper (the discussion paper) recognised the importance of having “a targeted focus on those who require the most support.” ACON welcomes the focus on young people who require the most support, and strongly advocates for the inclusion of same-sex attracted youth as one such priority group given the higher levels of discrimination, abuse as well as physical, mental and social disadvantages experienced by same-sex attracted youth.

In keeping with our call for same-sex attracted youth to be recognised as a priority group, it is also important to ensure that same-sex attracted youth are included in consultations by government on youth related matters and to have their voices heard on youth advisory bodies. Furthermore, key national data collections and pieces of research about young Australians needs to include same-sex attracted young Australians, including in the analysis and discussion of the data.

Recommendations:

1. The National Strategy explicitly include same-sex attracted youth as a priority group.
2. The National Strategy requires consultations with young people to include specific consultations with same-sex attracted youth and/or organisations that work with same-sex attracted youth.
3. The Commonwealth Government include a representative of same-sex attracted youth on any youth consultation mechanisms it establishes, such as the Australian Youth Forum Steering Committee.

² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³ K Muir, K Mullan, A Powell et. Al, *State of Australia's Young People: A report on the social, economic, health, and family lives of young people*, Australian Government Office for Youth, (2009), p. 151.

⁴ NSW Attorney General's Department, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁵ L Hillier, A Turner, A Mitchell, *Op. Cit.*, p. 40.

4. Future research on young people collect and disaggregates data on same-sex attracted youth and explicitly include discussions of same-sex attracted youth.

Prevention and Resilience Building

It is recognised that good primary prevention includes equipping people – particularly young people – with skills and techniques for addressing and managing issues which can create personal and interpersonal distress (*Primary prevention: Key issues and a competence perspective*; Ford, 1985).

Unfortunately, young same-sex attracted people are often exposed to some unique stressors in their lives which can affect how they feel about themselves. Principally, coming to terms with ones sexuality can be an enormously stressful period and young people often report not being able to immediately understand their feelings and being afraid of how others may react.

As mentioned earlier in this submission, ACON runs workshops and events with and for young people in order to explore issues such as coming out, sex and sexual health (including HIV and sexually transmitted infections), relationships, violence and homophobia.

More specifically, the process of accepting and dealing with your sexuality or ‘coming out’ often involves reviewing everything young people have been taught about sex and relationships and can even sometimes create cultural or religious issues. For some, this is very difficult, and for many, the skills and techniques that can be learned from others (peers) to address these kinds of issues are fundamentally important to a young person’s health and wellbeing.

Further support for this kind of work with young people is fundamentally important, and contributes to Australian Government health and social policy aims such as mental health promotion, suicide prevention, reductions in drug and alcohol use, and social inclusion – to name a few. Further, given the popularity of the internet and other on-line environments, and anonymity offered through this means, it is suggested that government’s consider prioritising funding for services directed toward same-sex attracted young people, to increase their resilience and skills in accepting and dealing with sexual diversity.

Recommendation:

5. The Australian Government prioritises funding support for non-government organisations to provide prevention and health promotion services to same-sex attracted young people, including an expansion of these services on-line, to increase their resilience and skills in accepting and dealing with sexual diversity.

Goals

ACON supports the goals outlined in the *discussion paper* for young Australians:

- Empowering young people to build their own lives for the future;
- Enabling young Australians to accept full responsibility for their lives, their actions and behaviours;
- Building resilience in young Australians to negotiate the great life challenges that lie ahead; and
- Building a healthier, safer and more productive Australia.

However, the impact of discrimination, homophobic attitudes and abuse inhibits the realisation of these goals for same-sex attracted young Australians. Research has shown that same-sex attracted young people who have been verbally abused are twice as likely to self harm in comparison to same-sex attracted young people that have not experienced any abuse.⁶ Alarmingly, for those who have experienced physical abuse, the rate of self-harm was three times higher than those who have not experienced any abuse (over 60%).⁷

The harmful impact of homophobic discrimination and abuse also includes depression and a higher level of alcohol, tobacco and other drug use by young Australians.⁸ The fear of homophobic attitudes and abuse also modifies the behaviour of same-sex attracted youth, forcing them to 'pretend' to be someone other than themselves.

Combating homophobia, discrimination and abuse is thus a key action towards making these goals achievable for all young people. A national education campaign against homophobia is one of important tool that could assist in creating an environment where all young people empowered, safe and healthy.

Community development projects and services are also needed to build resilience in young Australians. As previously mentioned, ACON's Fun & Esteem Project and the Young Women's Project are two examples of actions taken at the community level that support, empower and build resilience of same-sex attracted youth. In addition to providing forums to develop skills about the issues mentioned above, these projects also offer an opportunity for same-sex attracted youth to build networks and develop capacity that greatly assist young people to cope with discrimination, abuse and the resultant impacts on mental health.

Recommendation:

6. Through the National Strategy, the Australian Government implements and funds a national youth-based anti-homophobia education campaign.

Core Priorities

ACON welcomes the focus on young people in some key areas of their lives, including in educational institutions, in their families and communities, on-line and in the labour force. Same-sex attracted young people in Australia share many similar needs with young Australians in general in relation to these core priorities, however many same-sex attracted young people face more challenging and harmful environments in educational institutions, at home, in the community, on-line and in the workplace.⁹

Education institutions are particularly concerning sites of homophobic abuse. Three-quarters (74%) of same-sex attracted youth who have experienced homophobic abuse reported at least one incident occurring in schools.¹⁰ The rate for incidents on the street (over 40%) and at home (around 20%), although lower, still represent challenges for same-sex attracted young people, especially if multiple locations are not safe for them.

⁶ L Hillier, A Turner, A Mitchell, *Op. Cit.*, p. 45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-57.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

As more and more communication by young Australians are done via the internet, cyber-bullying has emerged as a significant issue for same-sex attracted young people on-line and beyond cyberspace. The Anti-Discrimination Board in NSW has “warned that statewide violence is being fuelled by an increasing number of homophobic websites run by Australians”.¹¹

To advance the core priorities articulated in a range of national strategies (including the aspirational intentions for the youth strategy) for all Australians necessarily entails addressing the issues of discrimination and abuse experienced by same-sex attracted youth, and the issues that manifest such as social isolation, depression and other mental health issues, self harm and problematic use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

Specialised services and community development projects that target same-sex attracted youth (such as the Fun & Esteem Project and the Young Women’s Project) are needed to understand and address these issues in a safe environment. Projects such as these also provide other opportunities to reach these young people through building networks, and add to social capital through increasing volunteering in the community, community connectedness and improving self esteem.

Mainstream services also need to make their services appropriate for same-sex attracted youth. Culturally appropriate services are essential so that same-sex attracted young people do not face barriers in accessing vital services.

Recommendations:

7. The National Strategy identifies sites of concentration for homophobic discrimination and abuse against same-sex attracted youth and develops strategies to combat discrimination and abuse in those locations.
8. The National Strategy recognises the need for and fund specialised services for same-sex attracted youth.
9. The National Strategy formally recognises the need for mainstream services to provide services that are appropriate for same-sex attracted youth.

Concluding remarks and Contact Details

ACON commends the Australian Government for recognising the need to consider a National Strategy for Young Australians. In taking forward and realising the potential of health, justice and social reforms, the attitudes, health and wellbeing of all young people are paramount.

ACON commends this submission and its recommendations to the Australian Government, and would welcome the opportunity to discuss its contents in more detail.

Ms Karen Price – Director of Policy, Research and Strategy can be contacted by email on kprice@acon.org.au or by telephone on 02 9206 2048.

A summary of the recommendations follows as the concluding section of this submission.

¹¹ Sydney Morning Herald, *Websites fuel hate crimes*, 15 June 2009

Summary of Recommendations

1. The National Strategy explicitly include same-sex attracted youth as a priority group.
2. The National Strategy requires consultations with young people to include specific consultations with same-sex attracted youth and/or organisations that work with same-sex attracted youth.
3. The Commonwealth Government include a representative of same-sex attracted youth on any youth consultation mechanisms such as the Australian Youth Forum steering committee.
4. Future research on young people collect and disaggregates data on same-sex attracted youth and explicitly include discussions of same-sex attracted youth.
5. The Australian Government prioritises funding support for non-government organisations to provide prevention and health promotion services to same-sex attracted young people, including an expansion of these services on-line, to increase their resilience and skills in accepting and dealing with sexual diversity.
6. Through the National Strategy, the Australian Government implements and funds a national youth-based anti-homophobia education campaign.
7. The National Strategy identifies sites of concentration for homophobic discrimination and abuse against same-sex attracted youth and develops strategies to combat discrimination and abuse in those locations.
8. The National Strategy recognises the need for and fund specialised services for same-sex attracted youth.
9. The National Strategy formally recognises the need for mainstream services to provide services that are appropriate for same-sex attracted youth.