

Legislative Council Inquiry

Rural Health Services in Tasmania

June 2022



Tasmania's gender, sexuality and intersex
status support and education service

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About Working It Out

Working It Out (WIO) is Tasmania's only dedicated support, advocacy and education service for Tasmania's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTIQ+) population. Our mission is to create a more just society for LGBTIQ+ individuals and their families.

WIO has been supporting LGBTIQ+ Tasmanians for over 23 years, providing services state-wide, including 1:1 counselling, peer group sessions, education and professional learning, and events, awards and activities. WIO's core funding has been via the Department of Health since 2001.

In addition, we are currently partnering with the Department of Education (DoE) to provide direct support into schools, are the Tasmanian partner for the national 'Silver Rainbow' program, delivering consultation and training to the Aged Care sector across the state; and the Tasmanian LGBTIQ+ provider for the Aged Care Know How program.

We are a nationally accredited Quality Improvement Performance (QIP) Rainbow Tick organisation and are registered to deliver the Rainbow Tick How2 Training. We promote and honour excellence in LGBTIQ+ inclusive service provision in Tasmania via our annual 'Dorothies Award', the only such award program in the state.

WIO is an important advisor to the State Government on LGBTIQ+ issues and needs, holding the co-chair position on the Whole-of-Government LGBTIQ+ Reference Group, and being a member of the Departments of Health, Education, Justice and Police, Fire and Emergency Services LGBTIQ+ reference groups.

In all our work we engage regularly with a wide cross-section of the LGBTIQ+ population. Our deep history and connection to communities means we are uniquely placed to work with and for LGBTIQ+ Tasmanians from all backgrounds.

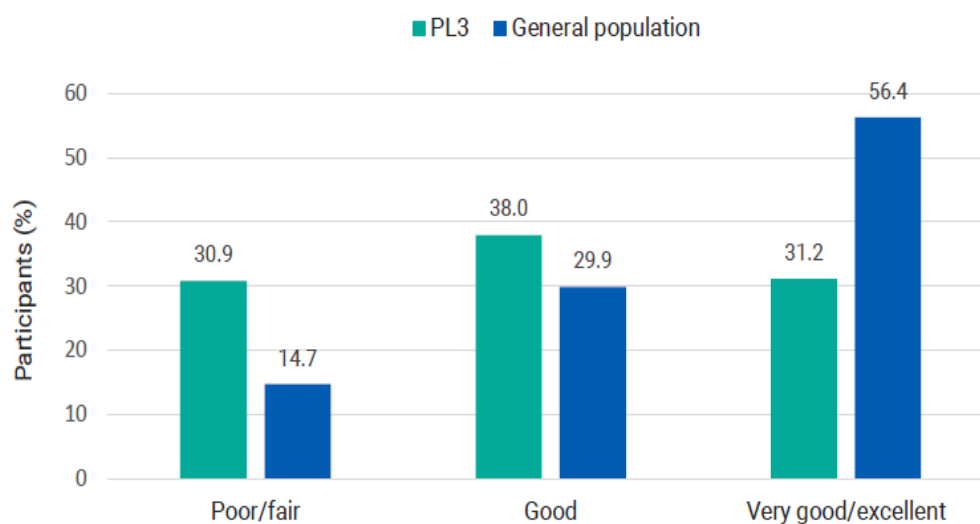
Following is our response to three topics from this inquiries terms of reference which relate directly to the experiences of LGBTIQ+ Tasmanians in rural locations.

1. Health outcomes, including comparative health outcomes

Two recent, large national studies - **Private Lives 3** (Hill et al., 2020) for over 18's and **Writing Themselves in 4** (Hill et al., 2021) 15-21 y.o – have found that LGBTIQ+ people experienced much poorer health outcomes than the general population.

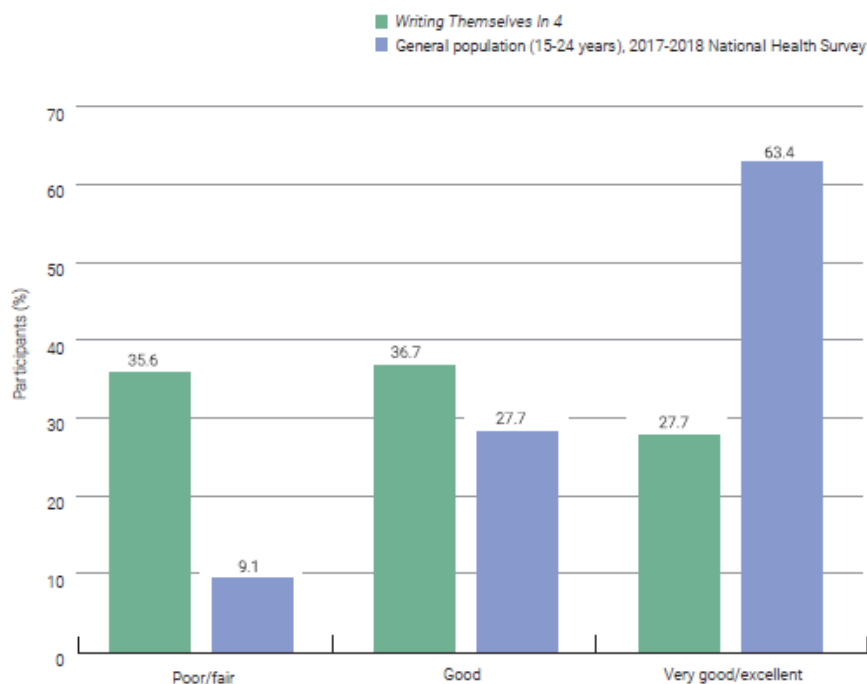
Privates Lives 3 – PL3 (Hill et al., 2020): Self-rated assessment of overall health

Figure 8: General health (n = 6,792)



Writing Themselves in 4 WT14 (Hill et al., 2021): : Self-rated assessment of overall health

Figure 28 Self-rated health of *Writing Themselves In 4* participants aged 15-21 years compared to general population aged 15-24 years, National Health Survey (2017-2018)



Outcomes for people living in rural and remote locations, were poorer than the average, with as few as 24% of LGBTIQ+ adults in rural areas reporting very good or excellent health and 36.7% reporting poor or fair health (Hill et al., 2020).

Mental health (levels of psychological distress, self-harm and suicide ideation) outcomes are ***some of the worst of any*** population group in the country.

Tasmanian specific data from the above two studies (see appendix 1 for full data) show that:

PL3

- 62.2% of LGBTIQ+ Tasmanian *adults* reported high or very high levels of psychological distress in the past 12 months, compared to 13% nationally.
- 79% had experienced suicide ideation at some time in their lives (13.3% nationally)
- 8% of people had attempted suicide in the past 12 months (0.4% nationally), 36.7% ever in their lives (13.3% nationally).

WT14

- 83% of LGBTIQ+ Tasmanian *young people* reported high or very high levels of psychological distress in the past 12 months, compared to 27% nationally.
- 89% had experienced suicide ideation at some time in their lives.
- 11.6% of people had attempted suicide in the past 12 months (3.8% nationally), 32.7% ever in their lives (5.3% nationally).

These outcomes are related to ongoing experiences of discrimination, abuse or harassment, with those impacted 1.6 times more likely to experience suicide ideation and psychological distress than those who had not experienced these abuses (Hill et al., 2020).

2. Availability and timeliness of health services

There are currently no dedicated services that meet the specific health needs of LGBTIQ+ Tasmanians.

Working It Out is funded by the division of Public Health, within the Department of Health, to provide generalist prevention and wellbeing services (1:1 support, peer groups, advocacy, education etc). Core funding supports approximately 3 staff, though this is typically supplemented with short-term grants and funding for other programs, including those in schools and aged care.

3 days a week of direct support is provided from Hobart, and under 2 days a week (13.5 hours a week) are provided in both Burnie/Devonport (combined) and Launceston. Support is also provided online, and via the phone, helping to meet the needs of people living outside urban areas. However, with such limited services, meeting the needs of people living in rural communities is difficult.

While LGBTIQ+ people can and do access mainstream health services, experiences can vary. Poor experiences, or fear of a poor experience, can lead to very low levels of service access.

Nationally, the Private Lives 3 study showed that although mainstream medical clinics were the most frequently accessed health service by LGBTIQ+ people in the past 12 months, they had the lowest proportion of participants who felt that their sexual orientation or gender identity was very/extremely respected (58.6% and 37.7% respectively) (Hills et al., 2020).

Of particular note is that only one third of trans and gender diverse participants reported feeling that their gender identity was very/extremely respected at a mainstream medical clinic (37.7%) or hospital (35.4%) in the past 12 month.

The proportion of participants who felt very/extremely respected was higher for those who attended a health service that caters only to LGBTIQ+ people or a mainstream medical clinic that is known to be LGBTIQ+ inclusive.

3. Barriers to access

A lack of access to either dedicated LGBTIQ+ health services, or LGBTIQ+ inclusive mainstream health services remains a significant barrier to accessing health services for LGBTIQ+ Tasmanians in rural and remote areas.

Not only is there a lack of dedicated LGBTIQ+ services, or a lack of surety about the inclusiveness of mainstreams services, there can be additional barriers such as the fear of outing oneself in communities with low and well-connected populations.

People in rural communities can also experience higher levels of minority stress, associated with internalised homophobia (feelings of self-loathing, fear and shame) and concealment (a fear of being discovered) compared with their metropolitan counterparts (Bowerman, 2020).

Accessing mental health services is a key area of concerns for LGBTIQ+ Tasmanians. The 2021 state government survey into the needs of LGBTIQ+ people (Dwyer et al., 2021) found that a properly funded mental health and suicide prevention strategy and services, including LGBTIQ+ specific services, and measures to ensure safety and inclusivity in mainstream service provision, was a key priority.

Other issues of concern noted in the literature include the provision of adequate services to meet the needs of gay men in relation to HIV prevention and support (Lea et al., 2017); and the lack of awareness of and support for the health needs of trans and gender diverse and intersex populations in Tasmania (Grant et al., 2021).

While online services might appear to be a ready answer in relation to mental health service provision in rural and remote locations, not all people can or want to access services online, and they may not meet the specific needs of rural communities. Bowman et al., (2020), for example, found that LGBTQ youth in rural areas are likely to have sensitive, customised needs that are not easily addressed by an en masse approach to internet-based

mental health care. Developers and providers of online supports need to take account of the challenges of negotiating availability, anonymity, privacy and connectedness.

4. Staffing of community health and hospital services

WIO was first funded by the State Government in 2001. While it has received continuous funding since then, a positive, it has had no funding increase in real terms since that time. Core funding (ie ongoing via a triennial contract) for 2022-23 is predicted to be \$414,000.

Given the plethora of national and local data highlighting the serious and ongoing health needs of LGBTIQ+ people in Tasmania, Working It Out requested a significant increase in funding (see Appendix 2) in the 2022-23 budget process. This was to ensure ongoing funding for temporarily funded programs, and to address clear gaps in our capacity to properly address the health needs of LGBTIQ+ Tasmanians across the state, particularly in the north and northwest. Our LGBTIQ+ Community Workers there - one in the north and one in the northwest - work only 13.5 hours a week each, which is inadequate.

Working It Out's 2022-23 budget bid was unsuccessful. As were our previous two submissions.

In addition to Working It Out's request, recent data has indicated the need for a dedicated LGBTIQ+ mental health and suicide prevention strategy, and a dedicated mental health service. Working It Out has been exploring models that could support the community (see Appendix 3) and is looking at ways to deliver therapeutic mental health services in addition to our current preventative measures.

References

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- Lea, T., Wagner, S., Anning, M., & Holt, M. 2017. *Barriers to HIV prevention and care among gay men in Tasmania: Final report*. Sydney: Centre for Social Research in Health, UNSW Sydney and Tasmanian Council on AIDS, Hepatitis & Related Diseases.

Appendix 1

Tasmanian specific data from PL3 and WT14 - attached

Appendix 2

WIO's 2022-23 Community Budget Submission – attached

Appendix 3

Proposed Therapeutic Mental Health Service Tasmania - attached