



[Rainbow Families QLD](#)

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Committee Secretary
Community Support and Services Committee
Parliament House
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PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS SUBMISSION

Dear Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the parliamentary inquiry into social isolation and loneliness. Our submission is made on behalf of rainbow families across Queensland, with a focus on representing the voice of the LGBTIQ+ community, and particularly rainbow families.

About Rainbow Families Queensland (RFQ)

RFQ supports, celebrates and advocates on behalf of LGBTIQ+ parents, carers and prospective parents, and their children, across Queensland. Our vision is to create a Queensland which meets the diverse needs of all rainbow families, including those in regional areas.

Our work

RFQ runs social groups, events, fertility information sessions, advocates on law reform issues, and has created targeted resources to promote inclusive child care and health services and plays a major role in reducing social isolation and loneliness in our community.

Our objectives

RFQ's objectives include a strong commitment to social inclusion, mental health, suicide prevention, and ensuring all rainbow families and children are healthy and resilient, connected to community which directly addresses two of Queensland Government's *Our Future State* key priorities: "Keep Queenslanders Healthy" and "Give All Our Children a Great Start".

In 2016 there were 10,500 children in Australia living in same-sex coupled families in Australia. However, this did not include the many children also living with single parents who identify as LGBTIQ+, and heterosexual couples with children where one or both parents are trans, gender diverse or intersex. While LGBTIQ+ parents are if anything underrepresented in ABS data, there was a 71.5% increase from the 2011 to 2016 census which demonstrates an emerging need. It also does not include the many rainbow families who may not have self-identified as part of the LGBTIQ+ community due

to social stigma and fear of discrimination. Our community is growing substantially every year, but we face significant barriers to inclusion.

Based on the latest health data, the mental health of our communities is in crisis. Lesbian, gay and bisexual people are twice as likely to be diagnosed and treated for mental health disorders in Australia and are 5 times more likely than those in the general population to attempt suicide. Transgender people are at substantially higher risk of suicide attempts (at 11 times the general population). 60% of Australians with an intersex variation had thought about suicide based on issues related to having a congenital sex variation. Many of these tragic statistics relate to social isolation and loneliness.

Drivers and Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness

As is the case for other marginalised communities, a major contributing factor to social isolation and loneliness of our communities is the ongoing impact of stigma and discrimination, compounded by negative experiences of vilification and hate crimes. Situations where people in the LGBTIQ+ community are most likely to experience social isolation and loneliness include but are not limited to:

- fear of vilification and discrimination when identifying as LGBTIQ+;
- isolation from family, friends and loved ones when coming out as LGBTIQ+, particularly if coming out from a heterosexual relationship with children;
- ostracism of our children and families from schools, other parents, neighbours, acquaintances family and work colleagues when identified as having LGBTIQ+ parents;
- while many new parents experience feelings of isolation and postnatal depression after the birth of a child, many of our new parents struggle with where they fit;
- online – deliberate exclusion, vilification and isolation particularly through social media interactions; and
- lack of representation of rainbow families, in traditional and modern media – including TV programs, movies, newspapers, magazines and similar publications.

The drivers and impacts of social isolation and loneliness extend far beyond these specific examples, and in reality, they are intrinsically connected and linked to the broader mental health issues identified above that affect our rainbow families community.

As an already marginalised community, if active efforts are not made to prevent social inclusion in our communities then social isolation and loneliness will continue to grow with further and ongoing tragic outcomes for our community.

As an example, a gay dad in our community recalled a situation of deliberate isolation towards their son:

“My seven-year-old son experienced deliberate isolation, stigma and loneliness when his classmate said that his parents told him not to play or talk with him because having two dads is not ok – this was in the classroom setting. He felt isolated and didn’t know what to do, and as the parent this was heart breaking and create feelings of guilt, self-doubt and self-depredation.”

While there is a large body of evidence to suggest that our children are doing as well as or better than children brought up by non-LGBTIQ+ parents, there is still much stigma for our families which directly causes social isolation and loneliness. We carry the burden of feeling like we are ‘less than’ or that we don’t have the ‘right’ to be parents.

Our families have described the feelings of being vilified as including “feeling less than”, “increased anxiety” and raised concerns about the “harmful impact on children even before they are old

enough to understand". These experiences can restrict the movements of families within the community and lead to social isolation.

If families and children fear that they will have negative experiences in the community, they will tend to avoid social situations and places where this can occur.

One of our families pointed to the 'sheltering' we have to do for our families to cope:

"I deliberately shelter my children from these things. We do not watch free to air tv, we carefully vet junk mail that comes, deliberately engage with people that are supportive of our family."

This state of hypervigilance is likely harmful to mental health for us and our children and increases the risk of social isolation and loneliness.

This social isolation and loneliness can also be at the hands of family and friends. Many of our community have experienced shocking acts of ostracism when they have left a heterosexual relationship with children after acknowledging and recognising their self-identity. Cases have included deliberate attempts to make them feel ashamed, allegations that they are not fit parents and deliberate denial of access to their children and isolation from family and friends.

The impacts of the current pandemic have also resulted in increased social isolation and loneliness for our community. Understandably, during periods of lockdown the risk of social isolation and loneliness increases for our community, whilst access to safe and supportive LGBTIQ+ identified services reduces as a result of these providers needing to close their services temporarily.

The far reaching social and economic disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the psychological and mental well-being of individuals across our community.

Despite this, Rainbow Families Qld continued to provide online support and services through our networks and created connections to community and mental health services.

It is essential to note that Rainbow Families Qld is only funded through volunteers and despite being the only organisation specifically delivering services to the LGBTIQ+ rainbow family's community, struggle to secure a sustainable ongoing source of funding – this is not a sustainable position.

For this reason, RFQ strongly supports increased ongoing funding for organisations such as RFQ who deliver essential social support, inclusive, services to LGBTIQ+ communities that are clearly at high risk of social isolation and loneliness.

An example of the help that RFQ provided to a new mother to survive early parenting and come out of isolation is provided below:

Case study

Being a new parent is challenging for most people but coping with the impact of stigma and discrimination can compound this experience. RFQ runs play groups for LGBTIQ+ identified parents and their children. Jessie* came to our service with a newborn baby. She had experienced depression after the birth of her child which was brought on, in part, by the way she was treated by her midwife. After the birth of her child as a single parent by choice, her midwife constantly asked her where "the father" was and told her that "your baby needs a male role model – who will that be?". This left Jessie feeling a sense of shame and insecurity. Once she found our group, Jessie established connections with our community which helped her through a dark time, ensuring that she could focus on the needs of her child and celebrate the precious early days of parenthood. *Pseudonym to protect identity.

Rainbow Families Qld Services and Initiatives addressing Social Isolation and Loneliness

Rainbow Families Qld deliver a range of services to our community which are sometimes literally the only positive social interaction that some rainbow families community members experience.

Our services focus on bringing rainbow families together, creating safe positive inclusive spaces, creating opportunities for social connection and generating a strong sense of community. These clearly link to supporting positive mental health solutions, reducing social isolation and loneliness and enriching and empowering our community. These services include:

- Statewide including regional Queensland Rainbow Families social media support groups
- Rainbow family play groups for new parents with children up to 5 years old
- Monthly social group meetups
- Regular social inclusion activities and events including discos, annual camps, children's adventure activities
- Advocacy support and change initiatives
- Connection to Australia wide Rainbow Families organisations

Recommendations for the Community Support and Services Committee

As noted above the mental health statistics for our community are tragic. There are critical gaps in mental health services targeting our community and increased support and funding for organisations such as RFQ who fill these gaps is needed. Our recommended priorities for the Inquiry include:

- Ensure targeted funding for at risk marginalised communities at high risk of social isolation and loneliness - we would also like to reiterate that Rainbow Families Qld is only funded through volunteers providing increased ongoing funding for organisations such as RFQ who deliver essential social support, inclusive, services to LGBTIQ+ communities that are clearly at high risk of social isolation and loneliness would be a top priority.
- Provide specific training to service providers to increase awareness and understanding of rainbow families and LGBTIQ+ communities to ensure services are inclusive, accessible, affordable and targeted appropriately towards priority sections of the community.
- Strengthen and enhance the overall capacity of the system supporting social inclusion – provide flexible and additional funding to strengthen the capacity of community based service providers through a sustainable ongoing model to enable proactively responses to the needs of people affected by mental health, social isolation, loneliness.

Yours sincerely



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