Our town: working with same-sex attracted young people in rural communities

Key Learnings from the
Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme

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Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

Our town: working with same-sex attracted young people in rural communities is based on the experiences of twelve projects established in rural Victoria to address the needs of same-sex attracted young people.

The projects were funded under the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme*, a joint initiative by VicHealth through the *Mental Health Promotion Plan 1999-2002* and the Rural Health and Development Branch, Department of Human Services.

The *Mental Health Promotion Plan (MHPP) 1999-2002* provides a framework for a range of interventions across Victoria to improve the social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of individuals. The plan identifies three social determinants of mental health:

■ Social connectedness

■ Freedom from discrimination and violence

■ Economic participation

The *MHPP* identified that young same-sex attracted people who live in rural areas were an important population group that required specific attention in relation to all three social determinants of mental health. In particular, it was acknowledged that this group of young people face significant mental health challenges in relation to the disclosure of their sexual identity, suicide, experiences of victimisation and bullying, violence, harassment and homophobia at school and in other community settings.

Importantly, the *MHPP* provides a framework in which issues of structural discrimination against same-sex attracted young people can be addressed. It seeks to bring about environmental and cultural change that will enhance the wellbeing of same-sex attracted young people in rural areas.

In order to start to address these issues, VicHealth established the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme*. Total funding was $234,943 with project funding ranging between $10,000 and $20,000.

Twelve projects were funded as part of the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme* to develop and implement strategies in local areas across rural Victoria. The projects were conducted in the 2000-2001 financial year.

A thirteenth project, the *Sexual Diversity Dissemination Project,* was funded to study the projects collectively and draw out common themes and issues. This report, developed in close collaboration with the twelve locally based projects, is the outcome of the *Sexual Diversity Dissemination Project.* The key learnings contained within this report are based on the collective and individual experiences of the projects, and were

drawn from interviews and workshops with project workers. The report focuses on both the opportunities and the challenges that project management teams encountered in their efforts to reduce the prejudice, discrimination and violence faced by young same-sex attracted people in their local communities.

The twelve projects covered a broad geographical area and were very diverse in their strategies. All broke new ground in their communities, demonstrating that rural Victoria is ready for action on the issues facing same-sex attracted young people. All stressed, however, that the process of achieving community attitudinal change is complex, requiring visible leadership and a long-term ongoing commitment from both State Government and key local stakeholders.

There are a number of current government initiatives that provide a context for acting on issues for same-sex attracted young people in Victoria. These include the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Gay and Lesbian Health, the Attorney General's Advisory Committee on Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Issues, the passage of the *Equal Opportunity (Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation) Act 2000* and the *Statute Law Amendment (Relationships) Act 2001,* both of which take significant steps to reduce discrimination against transgender people and people in same-sex relationships.

In addition to the initiative taken by VicHealth and the Department of Human Services in funding the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme*, these broader steps indicate a willingness at the State Government level to act on issues affecting transgender and same-sex attracted Victorians.

In order to see real outcomes at the local level however, the role of communities in building their own capacity to respond to the needs of same-sex attracted young people is critical. As the experiences captured in this report indicate, the need for communities to be fully engaged in the processes of change that involve them cannot be

over-emphasised. This is particularly the case in relation to action on issues that may be challenging to some members of the community, including mental health issues and those facing same-sex attracted young people. An emphasis on the need for strategies that encompass collaboration between stakeholders, have multi-level interventions and a long-term commitment was consistent across all projects.

Looking at both the opportunities and the challenges, a number of common themes, trends, tools and learnings emerge that provide useful signposts for communities that want to act to improve the social connectedness and safety of same-sex attracted young people in their local area. These *Key Learnings* fall into seven main areas:

- Values

- Community Readiness

- Participation

- Implementation

- School Settings

- Worker Wellbeing

- Media

Within each of these areas, there is a range of critical findings (detailed in summary form immediately following the Executive Summary). A number of overarching *Key Learnings* can be highlighted.

Values

It is important to recognise that any work that touches on issues of gender and sexuality will be challenging for many people. This requires a high degree of clarity on the part of project managers about what they mean when they use key terms such 'same-sex attracted' and 'transgender' as well as 'diversity' and 'anti-discrimination'. Being clear about their understanding of these complex concepts is essential to ensure effective project design and a shared understanding of goals

amongst all key stakeholders. Different workers, organisations and communities exhibited different understandings in relation to these terms. In particular, some were more ready than others to address sexual diversity more directly. Overall, projects recommended a 'softly-softly' approach that did not shy away from raising difficult issues but which took into account the crucial need to pitch projects at a level most likely to achieve sustainable change.

Community Readiness

Community readiness examines the ways in which project workers and managers determined how prepared their local area was in relation to addressing the issues facing same-sex attracted young people. It focuses on the history of service delivery in related areas, the existence of relevant infrastructure and networks and the importance of community leadership and ownership. Despite the broad range of rural settings and levels of community readiness, the experiences of the projects emphasise the finding that communities are always ready to act to some degree. That is, a community is never 'not ready' to act – it is just that the level and type of intervention will vary from place to place. In strengthening community capacity to act, projects relied heavily on local reference groups and the leadership of key stakeholders.

Participation of Young People

In order to improve the wellbeing and social connectedness of same-sex attracted young people, all project teams recognised the importance of making the needs of young people central to project design. A number of projects had young people involved at the management level, while others provided skill development and participation opportunities at various stages. However, a commitment to encouraging the participation of young people requires significant resources and, given that the risks of participation in activities that deal with issues of same-sex attraction may be higher in rural areas than elsewhere, many projects decided to proceed with caution on this issue.

Lack of confidentiality and lack of access to appropriate and affordable support services remain a key concern in rural areas, compounded in many instances by the practical (and costly) barriers to participation such as inadequate access to transport and communication technologies.

Implementation

In relation to project design and implementation, the need to take a holistic and multi-level approach was emphasised by all project teams as essential for community ownership and project sustainability. Overall, achieving community support to act on issues affecting same-sex attracted young people took longer than expected. This required flexibility and the ability to tailor projects to respond to community needs and issues as they arose. As a result of this need to move slowly and be flexible, resources were stretched, highlighting the fact that it is difficult to undertake such complex community development work with limited funding and in short time frames. One important way of addressing this issue was the instigation of collaborative working relationships between local rural agencies and statewide agencies with expertise in sexuality issues.

School Settings

It became evident that one of the major reasons why schools are not always keen to act on issues of same-sex attraction is a fear of negative responses from parents. This was seen as an important key factor related to school participation in a number of projects. In the context of the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme* it should be noted that there was no parental backlash reported by any of the respondents, a factor which may work positively to encourage future participation of schools in similar activities. Respondents felt that by taking an active approach and working to ensure parental support for work in this area, particularly through the school council, they were able to short circuit this fear of conflict.

Worker Wellbeing

Consistent across all respondents was concern for the wellbeing of those engaged in what is at times risky work. Those working on the projects experienced a number of serious incidents, including property damage and threats to personal safety. Such events reinforce the reality that issues of worker isolation, support, resources and safety are critical project management issues. Also apparent, however, were the personal and professional rewards of seeing positive community change on issues affecting same-sex attracted young people.

Media

The announcement of the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme* generated significant media interest at both the state and local level. This attention was positive and negative, creating both challenges and opportunities for projects. Overall, the importance of media and communication strategies in relation to all projects funded under the scheme was highlighted. Centrally linked to questions of community readiness, the need to strategically position projects in relation to local (and statewide) media became a central issue for VicHealth as well as for individual projects.

Summary of Key Learnings

Key Learnings: Values

- Spend time clarifying the core values of the project – these will shape all aspects of project design and implementation.

- Be clear about what you mean when you use key concepts such as 'gender' and 'sexuality'. These can mean different things to different people.

- Make sure that the core values and key concepts are expressed in ways that make sense in the local community.

- Focus on striking the right balance for your community between the promotion of sexual diversity and the prevention of homophobic behaviours.

- Recognise that young people are not homogeneous – different groups of young people have different needs.

Key Learnings: Community Readiness

- A community is never 'not ready'.

- Different communities are at different stages of readiness in relation to addressing the needs of same-sex attracted young people. A combination of bottom-up community development and top-down government and organisational leadership is required.

- Local research is essential to determine the stage of community readiness and to develop strategies for opening up spaces for action.

- Building on existing infrastructure will minimise isolation, increase effectiveness and community ownership and maximise long-term sustainability.

- The establishment of a local reference group was a key success factor for many projects.

Key Learnings: Participation of Young People

- Working towards the participation of young people in rural areas requires additional resources to meet the costs of practical needs such as transport and communication.

- Participation can be risky for young people in rural communities due to issues of confidentiality and lack of access to appropriate and affordable support services.

- Locating the project under the auspices of a well established and continuing service (such as a local health or youth-focussed service) that had the resources and commitment to provide ongoing support to young people at the close of the project was useful.

- A focus on skills development through the production of resources (posters, pamphlets

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and internet sites) and through drama was a very successful way of encouraging the participation of young people.

■ Participation of young people takes place in the context of families, caregivers and communities – broad education and awareness campaigns are essential.

Key Learnings: Implementation

■ Collaborative relationships between key local agencies are critical for the set-up phase and the longer-term sustainability of a project.

■ Strong program infrastructure support and linkages between projects in different regions will increase a project's capacity to be effective.

■ Given the sensitive nature of the issues, projects need to be flexible in responding to community concerns as they arise, and to tailor their project accordingly.

■ Work incrementally and ensure that you are bringing your community along with you. Push the boundaries but don't break them.

■ A combination of local knowledge and outsider expertise can prove to be a very powerful tool for highlighting the importance of the issues.

■ Credible, respected organisations (in this case VicHealth) provided permission to raise concerns around same-sex attracted young people.

■ Given the extent of unmet need identified by projects, more time and more money would have been well placed.

■ Overall, more resources are needed to ensure the viability and sustainability of programs targeting same-sex attracted young people in rural communities.

Key Learnings: School Settings

■ Despite fears expressed by some schools, there was no negative parental backlash experienced in any of the projects.

■ Schools tend to work conservatively on these issues – projects need to be developed slowly and incrementally. Building strong foundations through good background work and research was essential.

■ Identifying leaders and allies in the school community is very important – at all levels of the school hierarchy.

■ Establish positive relationships with parents through school councils and other parent networks.

■ Engaging central and regional support from the Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET) is critical.

■ Point to the role of the project in value-adding to school resources.

■ Working with more than one school in a region improves the probability of other schools being involved in and supporting the project.

■ Look for relevant policy frameworks to back up your work. Policy frameworks can be a way of emphasising the importance of action on issues for same-sex attracted young people, including the responsibility of schools to provide a safe environment for their students.

Key Learnings: Worker Wellbeing

■ Project managers and designers need to build in strategies from the outset to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their workers.

■ It is essential that clear guidelines be in place to minimise the possible personal and professional costs of involvement in interventions that address sensitive issues in isolated environments.

- Ensure that skill development on these issues happens across the organisation – do not place all responsibility on the individual worker.

- The establishment of ongoing networking and resourcing opportunities is important for increasing the sustainability of continuing action flowing from the initial *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme* funding.

Key Learnings: Media

- A statewide media strategy needs to be consultative and take into account different levels of community readiness – one size does not fit all.

- Support and training in media risk management is important for those workers engaged with projects at the local level.

- Having a well-targeted proactive strategy can generate positive media at the local level.

- Don't be afraid to take control of the media by getting in before negative reporting starts.

Introduction

Our town: working with same-sex attracted young people in rural communities is based on the experiences of twelve projects established in rural Victoria as part of the VicHealth *Mental Health Promotion Plan 1999-2002*. Diverse in geographical location, institutional setting and implementation strategies, these twelve projects shared one main objective – to improve the wellbeing of same-sex attracted young people in rural communities.

In close collaboration with the twelve projects, we have sought to draw out from their collective and individual experiences a set of Key Learnings to serve as a useful guide for the implementation of future interventions in the field. Looking at both the opportunities and the challenges identified by the respondents, we have focussed on common themes and issues, analysing how the learning outcomes from these experiences might be usefully applied in other settings.

Above all, this is a report about the need for continuing action to improve the wellbeing of young same-sex attracted people in rural communities in Victoria. It recognises the groundbreaking nature of the work undertaken by the twelve projects and the many unpaid hours that committed project workers have contributed in their local areas. It regards the projects as a very important first step in addressing the issue and piloting innovative, locally tailored action plans. Many more steps are required, however, and this report on the Key Learnings is intended to emphasise both the importance of more action in the area, as well as to provide practical indicators that will guide what this future action will look like.

Broader Policy Context

There are a number of current government initiatives that provide a context for acting on issues for same-sex attracted young people in Victoria. These include (but are not limited to) the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Gay and Lesbian Health, the Attorney General's Advisory Committee on Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Issues, the passage of the *Equal Opportunity (Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation) Act 2000* and the *Statute Law Amendment (Relationships) Act 2001*, both of which take significant steps to reduce discrimination against transgender people and people in same-sex relationships.

In addition to the initiative taken by VicHealth and the Department of Human Services in funding the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme*, these broader steps demonstrate a preparedness at the State Government level to act on issues affecting same-sex attracted Victorians.

Policy Context: Mental Health Promotion Plan 1999-2002

VicHealth is currently in the process of implementing its *Mental Health Promotion Plan 1999-2002* (*MHPP*). This plan provides a framework for a range of interventions across Victoria to improve the social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of individuals.

The plan identifies three social determinants of mental health:

■ Social connectedness, including access to stable and supportive environments, participation in a variety of social and physical activities, access to social and supportive relationships, and having a valued social position.

■ Freedom from discrimination and violence, including physical security and opportunities for self-determination and control of one's life.

■ Economic participation, including access to work and education, adequate housing and money.

Within the *Mental Health Promotion Plan 1999-2002,* there is a clear recognition that there are some groups and individuals within the community who are more likely to experience isolation and discrimination and who have a more limited ability to participate in economic and social life than others. To determine what the needs of specific groups were, VicHealth established six working groups. Two of these groups, the Rural Task Group and the Youth Task Group, suggested that same-sex attracted young people who live in rural communities are an important population group requiring special attention.

As a result of this identified need, a small grants program targeting this group was established. Known as the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme*, the aim was to provide an opportunity for rural communities, gay and lesbian groups and mental health services to address the needs of same-sex attracted young people in rural areas. The scheme was developed in partnership with the Department of Human Services, Rural Health and Development Branch which is responsible for the implementation of the key elements of the Government's policies on health and rural communities. To implement the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme*, VicHealth established a Same-Sex Attracted Working Group. This group developed the aims and objectives of the scheme, as well as determining funding priorities. Total funding was $234,943 with project funding ranging between $10,000 and $20,000.

The aims of the *Sexual Diversity Grants* were to:

■ Improve the mental wellbeing of young people (10-25 years) in rural areas who are attracted to people of the same sex.

■ Support the social connectedness of these young people within their communities.

■ Enhance opportunities for self-determination and physical security within the target group.

■ Reduce discrimination and violence against these young people.

■ Ameliorate the impact of any discrimination by working with these young people directly, or endeavouring to change the environments in which they live.

The objectives of the scheme were to:

■ Initiate innovative mental health promotion actions or extend current activities for the target group.

■ Promote and maintain partnerships between agencies and other service providers that work with young people in rural areas.

■ Share and disseminate information between agencies and individuals that will lead to increased social connectedness and a reduction in discrimination for the target group.

■ Reflect at least one of the designated determinants of mental health.

A total of twelve projects were funded under the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme* in rural areas. The following table provides a summary of the twelve locally based projects. A more detailed description is included in *Appendix A*.

A thirteenth project, the *Sexual Diversity Dissemination Project* was also funded to study the projects collectively in order to draw out the common themes and issues and to present the findings in an accessible way. This report on *Key Learnings* is the outcome of the *Sexual Diversity Dissemination Project*. A description of the methodology that underpinned the development of this report is outlined in the next chapter.

It is important to note that although issues for young transgender people were included in the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme* specifications, no specifically targeted interventions were designed to meet the needs of this group of young people. By pointing to the inter-connectedness of issues of gender and sexuality, and by highlighting the fact that it is now time to start to address the needs of young people with emerging identity issues, this report hopes to strengthen the capacity of communities to address these concerns in future projects.

Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme – Summary of Projects

Exploring the Young Rainbow Project

Using a community development approach, the Central Gippsland Health Service plans to increase community awareness of sexual diversity amongst young people within south eastern Victoria. Areas targeted include Sale, Maffra, Heyfield, Loch Sport, Rosedale, Briagolong, Tinamba and Dargo. It will provide opportunities for social connectedness by strengthening service provision and providing ongoing information and events for young people to engage in. The project will also support existing groups in consolidating their activities.

Connect Project

This project is based on a capacity-building model designed to link Brophy Youth and Family Services with four rural schools in the Moyne and Corangamite Shires. The project aims to better connect young people with their school in order to reduce isolation and early school leaving. It has three interlinked components: individual work with students and families; group work to educate students and teachers about homophobia and Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex (GLBTQI) issues; and community development initiatives such as an internet site and peer mediation. Through supporting young people in this way, Connect hopes to provide positive role models for young people exploring issues of sexual identity and reduce the likelihood of them engaging in risk-taking behaviours. An additional aim is to reduce the stigma associated with GLBTQI amongst members of the general community.

Breaking Through: Schools, Family and Rural Community Partnerships Project

Through partnerships between school, family and the community, this project undertaken by the Bouverie Centre promotes greater tolerance of diversity and challenges sexual discrimination in the schools and their communities. Breaking Through uses the Theatre of the Oppressed, professional training and development resources from Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, DEET, the Bouverie Centre and the resources of the Macedon Ranges community to develop strategies and networks that provide information on, and raise awareness around, issues of sexual diversity in the regional community. This diverse range of strategies aims to establish a climate of ownership, enthusiasm for change and a preparedness to challenge homophobia with a view to improve the health outcomes of same-sex attracted youth.

Theatre of the Oppressed

Theatre of the Oppressed is an innovative performance art project by Colac Community Health Service involving students in interactive drama activities that provide a better understanding of the issues experienced by same-sex attracted young people. A mixed gender group of students will develop a performance over five days to present to their school and the community. The project will assist young cast members to develop self-esteem, discuss issues of homophobia and encourage further discussions within the classroom and curriculum settings. Additional information and assistance, including process sessions for teachers and youth workers, will be offered as well as counselling and de-briefing opportunities for young people within the project.

Mansfield Community Diversity Project

Women's Health Goulburn North East and the Upper Murray Centre Against Sexual Assault will work in partnership with the Mansfield community and youth services to build a broad base of support, ownership and responsibility for the project. A project management team will determine and implement a range of strategies including professional training, community awareness and youth events. The aim is to work towards creating an environment of support for young people related to sexual diversity, increasing the capacity of the youth and education sectors to respond appropriately and establish an ongoing commitment to the issues.

Gippsland Sexual Diversity Youth Outreach Project

The Gippsland Gay and Lesbian Network will develop posters and brochures designed to portray positive images of same-sex attracted young people and a web page that reflects the interests and trends of the target group. These projects will develop the capacity of the Network to address the needs of rural young people who are same-sex attracted. Goals of the Sexual Diversity Outreach Project are to celebrate the diverse lifestyles of same sex-attracted young people, to support the individual endeavours of those questioning their identity and to be a valued resource within the community. A public media event to share the positive posters will highlight this important issue.

Supportive School Environments Project

The project by the Centre for Adolescent Health and ARCSHS will target students and teachers in the Gippsland region, aiming to develop a positive and safer school community environment. The framework for the development will be provided by a whole school model and will enhance the skills and knowledge of school welfare coordinators, teachers, students and support services. This whole-school mental health promotion program will provide schools with tools that enable them to affirm inclusion and celebrate sexual diversity. The success of this approach will be reflected by the enhanced sense of security, social connectedness and positive regard within the school setting.

Pride and Prejudice Project

This project by Deakin University and the City of Greater Geelong will add value to a successful existing program of the same name designed to reduce homophobia and sexual discrimination in schools. Through evaluation, refinement and the development of a training package for workers and teachers in the school, this project seeks to extend the mental health promotion themes 'Pride and Prejudice' with appropriate strategies and resources for school-based interventions. Changes in students' attitudes, as well as their self-esteem and social connectedness as a result of the program, will also be measured.

Affirming Diversity Project

The Swan Hill District Hospital's Affirming Diversity Project aims to raise awareness and provide information regarding issues affecting same-sex attracted youth. The project will target a number of areas including schools, parents and friends, service providers (including general practitioners and the police), the general community and, indirectly, same-sex attracted young people. The project's major activities will include education and information for service providers, school teachers and the general community; the development of a support network for same-sex attracted young people and their parents; and awareness raising activities that support mental health.

SSAY Something Project

The Family Planning Victoria and Cutting Edge Youth Services Same Sex Attracted Youth (SSAY) Project has identified mental health issues involved in the experience of disclosure and lack of supportive environments as its key concerns for same-sex attracted young people in the Goulburn Valley. There are a number of agencies within this region that the SSAY Something Project hopes to involve through capacity building and knowledge sharing. Activities will include a school-based program in the Shepparton District; a support and education project in a major foster care agency in the Hume region; and an extension of the health, social welfare and youth worker links through information and networking. The SSAY Something Project recognises that there is migration from the Goulburn Valley and hopes that by connecting young people to accessible resources the project will reduce the incidence of stress, anxiety, depression and self-harm behaviours of same-sex attracted young people in regional Victoria.

Y-GLAM Rural Tour

Y-GLAM Theatre Project, a program of the Moreland Community Health Service, delivered a community arts and education program in two regions of Victoria, Kinglake and Ballarat. The project aimed to raise community awareness about the issues that face same-sex attracted young people and increase the level of appropriate service provision and support for this target group. Y-GLAM, a theatre group for SSAY, devised a theatre work, Which Way Out, exploring the issues of coming out in a country town. This was performed twice in each region followed by panel discussions. Alongside this, Statewide Education and Training in Youth Suicide Prevention (STEP) training and presentations were run for local organisations and schools.

The Outward Project

The Outward Project is targeted at gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth who are living in rural communities throughout Victoria. This project is the result of a Rural Outreach Report prepared by the ALSO Foundation in 1999. The Outward Project outlines a series of activities that cross-pollinate capacity building, knowledge generation and structural changes on issues that affect sexually diverse youth. The project will include local government lobbying, facilitation of a sexual diversity network and development of appropriate resources. Discussion with the groups involved concerning project direction will be ongoing. The Project will continue to consider ways of strengthening rural gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth by assisting them to build networks and participate in functions that support safe, healthy and affirming environments.

Methodology

The *Sexual Diversity Dissemination Project (SDDP)* was a collaborative research exercise, relying extensively on the goodwill of locally based project workers and managers to gather information on the progress of each individual initiative. Given the diversity of projects in terms of their geographic location, their institutional setting and their implementation strategies, deciding how to identify and bring together the very different experiences of the project respondents was quite a challenge in itself.

The *Key Learnings* approach was adopted as a way of drawing out common issues and practice-based solutions by looking at the opportunities and challenges of each project. Despite the diversity of activities and locations, strong themes did emerge through a series of semi-structured interviews, a one-day workshop and two informal networking meetings. Each of these themes is addressed in the chapter that follows.

As well as being invaluable to the development of the *Key Learnings* report, a number of respondents commented that it had also been useful for them to reflect in a structured way, through participation in the interviews and workshops as part of this project, on the development of their own strategies.

The aims and objectives of the *Sexual Diversity Dissemination Project* (SDPP) as determined by VicHealth were to:

■ Study the projects funded under the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme*.

■ Investigate the major program responses to the needs of young people living in rural areas who are attracted to members of the same sex.

■ Develop a coherent framework within which these programs can be analysed.

■ Analyse the programs by drawing out common themes and issues.

■ Reflect on the models of action developed through these projects that may be applied to other settings.

■ Facilitate a forum on issues and implementation strategies related to same-sex attracted young people living in rural areas that will involve project staff and other interested people.

■ Develop a comprehensive report of the findings that canvasses the major health

promotion practice issues and can be disseminated widely to groups and organisations that are responsible for providing services to young people in rural areas.

In order to meet these aims and objectives, the report writers established a Reference Group. The role of the SDDP Reference Group was to provide direction to the development of project methodology and to offer expert advice on the identification of key themes and issues, including the promotion of effective practice strategies. In short, their job was to ensure that the *Sexual Diversity Dissemination Project* remained on track and produced a high-quality and and accessible report for wide use by those engaged in providing services to young people in rural areas.

The members of the SDDP Reference Group were: Rhonda Brown (The Bouverie Centre, La Trobe University), Deborah Dempsey (Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University), Sue Dyson (Women's Health in the South East), Kellie-Ann Jolly (VicHealth), Ralph McLean (Rural Health and Development Branch, Department of Human Services), Ian Seal (Family Planning Victoria), Margaret Sheehan (VicHealth), Ben Witham (Rural Health and Development Branch, Department of Human Services) and Daniel Witthaus (City of Moonee Valley).

Information gathering

In September 2000, VicHealth brought all the projects funded under the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme* together for the first time. At this forum, the authors presented a draft methodology to the group. Responses from the group formed the basis for a revised methodology that was again discussed with all the project workers present at a further meeting in November. Project workers agreed to the revised methodology that consisted of three principal stages.

Stage One of the information gathering process involved a visit to all twelve projects and the first

of two semi-structured interviews focussed on the set-up phase and initial opportunities and challenges experienced by the project workers. Held at the six-month point, these interviews lasted from one to two hours each.

Stage Two was centred on a one-day workshop held in May. The aim of this workshop was to collect detailed information from practitioners on the implementation of strategies in their program. It drew out common themes and issues, forming the basis for the structure of the issues discussed in the *Key Learnings* report.

Stage Three was a final interview held at the end of the project funding cycle. This interview, structured around the key themes identified at the one-day workshop, enabled participants to reflect on the overall outcomes of their project and expand on recommendations for future action.

All respondents were guaranteed anonymity in the interview process, encouraging them to speak openly about the negative as well as the positive aspects of their experience. This is reflected in the extensive usage of interview material throughout the text. In addition, all those engaged on the projects had the opportunity to comment on the *Key Learnings* report at the draft stage to ensure that their own concerns and suggestions were reflected in the final outcome of the *Sexual Diversity Dissemination Project.*

Research and Resources

There is a wide range of literature from Australia and overseas that has informed the development of this report. Of particular importance has been research that documents the experiences of same-sex attracted young people and the ways in which these experiences have been responded to in various settings.

While it is not possible to discuss all relevant material here, this chapter will set out some key issues and findings, drawing attention to resources that are currently available at the national and state level to assist those working with same-sex attracted young people. A list of reference material (highlighting Australian research) is included at the end of the report for those who wish to follow up on the issues raised.

Defining Sexuality

Sexuality is one of the socially constructed categories that we use to make sense of our selves and the world we live in. Like gender, class and ethnicity, it is a category that mediates our everyday relationships and social practices (see Altman 1992: 36; Pallotta-Chiarolli 1996).

Historically, there have been many different approaches taken towards understanding sexuality. The humanities, the social and physical sciences, and many of the world's religions have theorised about the nature and origins of sexuality. Sexuality has been understood to be god-given, biologically driven, an effect of psychic drives, an essence that is shaped via social systems of reward and punishment or a base overlayed with cultural meanings (Connell and Dowsett 1992b).

Contemporary social theory, however, is not so much concerned with the search for the origins of sexuality but rather is interested in exploring sexuality as a part of our selves that takes shape as it is actively lived in culture. In other words, it explores sexuality as a way of taking up space in the world. Altman (drawing on Pronger) puts this very succinctly:

> (sexuality is) a way of being and understanding: Rather than defining a person, "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" describe modes of being in the world, fluid ways of perceiving or interpreting oneself and others in gendered culture (Altman 1992: 36).

Labels and Identities

Various academic disciplines use different labels to describe and name sexuality and it is clear that these labels are embedded in certain assumptions about the nature of sexuality. The projects that have been funded under the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme* used various labels to

describe the group that they were targeting – including lesbian, bisexual, gay, queer, same-sex attracted and transgender.

In relation to sexuality, the label same-sex attracted young person (SSAY) is used throughout this report. We chose this label above all the others for a number of reasons. Firstly, it allows for a degree of complexity and can accommodate a range of individuals, including those who are exclusively attracted to members of the same sex and those for whom being same-sex attracted is one aspect of their sexuality. Secondly, it allows for a degree of fluidity, recognising the changing nature of sexuality for young people. Finally, it is a label that (despite its wide application) also enables us to focus our attention on the young people who often experience discrimination because of their sexuality, that is, young people who are same-sex attracted.

For those young people with emerging gender identity issues, the label transgender is used. This label is one that is preferred because it serves as an inclusive term for all those young people whose gender identity may not fully correspond with their biological sex. Again, it allows for a degree of complexity and fluidity, recognising that for young people the issues caught up in gender identity are complex, that they may shift over time and that they can be expressed in a variety of ways.

Invisibility/Visibility

In the late 1990s, the Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society (ARCSHS) designed a poster for use in school staff rooms. It featured a central blurred group of figures that were impossible to see with any accuracy. The poster carried the caption:

> Most teachers say that they have never seen a gay student.

Many researchers have commented that until very recently, SSAY were largely invisible in the youth literature and in the consciousness of the

professionals working with them (Plummer, 1989). The ARCSHS poster alludes to one of the reasons that this is the case, that is, sexuality is one aspect of who we are that is not able to be readily or accurately observed. (See also Misson 1996: 124).

However, where researchers have sought to determine the number of participants who identify as same-sex attracted, the results have indicated quite significant numbers. Researchers at ARCSHS, for instance, have found that between 8-11% of young people do not describe themselves as exclusively heterosexual (Hillier et al 1998: 1). Using these figures in concert with demographic data collected by the Victorian Department of Education Employment and Training (DoE 2000: 17), this indicates that with a total enrolment of 350,917 secondary school students enrolled across school systems in Victoria, there are anywhere between 28,073 and 38,600 same-sex attracted young people attending a secondary school in Victoria.

Research that reports on the number of people in the community who identify as transgender has not been conducted. In contrast to the issues of invisibility raised above for same-sex attracted young people, young transgender people may in fact struggle with issues of visibility as they challenge dominant social norms of appropriate feminine and masculine appearance and behaviours. These factors may mean that they can be perceived to be gay or lesbian (whatever their sexuality) and be subject to similar forms of discrimination.

Experience of SSAY and Transgender Young People

In 1978, the Melbourne Gay Teachers and Students Group (MGTSG) published a booklet entitled 'Young Gay and Proud' (MGTSG 1978a). In an associated pamphlet, the MGTSG set out their rationale for publishing the booklet, suggesting that heterosexist values permeate the subject content that young people encounter in schools and that accordingly it is not surprising to find that some

students act in ways that are consistent with that heterosexism. The author's state:

> Notwithstanding the proliferation of human relationships programmes in secondary schools, there is still an abysmal lack of information about homosexuality... In the vacuum there prevails a welter of misinformation, half-truths and downright lies... The (heterosexist) attitudes that most students demonstrate are understandable if not acceptable. They too have been force fed a diet of unchallenged myths by the institutions responsible for information dissemination (MGTSG 1978b: 1).

Unfortunately, the themes that the Melbourne Gay Teachers and Students Group referred to over twenty years ago continue to be relevant today, as evidenced by a range of recent research. The 1990s have seen a proliferation of academic and other writings focusing on the experiences of same-sex attracted and transgender young people in schools and other youth sector settings (see the bibliography for key examples). Many of the themes that emerge in the contemporary literature echo themes that were evident in the literature from earlier times. These include discussion of social practices that seek to constrain same-sex attracted young people as they endeavour to live in new and expansive ways, and reports of widespread harassment, bullying and discrimination. They also draw attention to the continuing paucity of support services available to young people to deal with these attitudes and practices.

Two recent reports by researchers in Victoria discuss the experiences of same-sex attracted young people and young transgender people in detail.

The first of these, entitled *Writing Themselves In* was published in 1998. It is based on a survey of 750 same-sex attracted young people aged between 14 and 21, with 49% of the sample female and 51% male and the average age of respondents being 18 (Hillier et al 1988: 1). The researchers found that one-third of the respondents reported that they had been discriminated against because of their sexuality, with 46% of the respondents indicating that they had been verbally abused (Hillier et al 1988: 2, 33).

School is reported as being *the* place where young people were most at risk of abuse, with the authors stating that: "More young people [almost 70%] were abused at school than anywhere else, including the streets" (Hillier et al 1998: 2, 33).

School was not the only place, however, where same-sex attracted young people were likely to experience harassment, with the researchers reporting that the streets, social and sporting events, work, church and public transport were other sites that carried the threat of abuse (Hillier et al 1998: 35).

The Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby (VGLRL) released another important research report in 2000. Called *Enough is Enough,* the report considers the extent and nature of discrimination and abuse experienced by gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in Victoria in the late 1990s and draws on data provided by 929 respondents (VGLRL 2000: 1). Of these, 30% were aged between 19 and 29 and 3% were below 18 (VGLRL 2000: 12). Eighty-four percent of respondents reported that they had experienced discrimination over the past five years. Discrimination was reported around a wide range of issues including: assault and harassment in a public place, education, provision of goods and services, accommodation and membership of clubs, religious and sporting organisations. The issue of invisibility was also reported by respondents as impacting in a significant manner on wellbeing (VGLRL 2000: 2-4).

Mental Health

For young people, the cultural and social context in which they develop their sense of gender and sexual identity is one that privileges a fixed understanding of gender norms (what it means

to be female or male) and an assumption of heterosexuality. This happens at the expense of gender and sexual orientations and identifications that challenge these norms, and makes it more likely that same-sex attracted young people and transgender young people will be marginalised. It also means that they may be at a higher risk of developing mental health problems.

In Victoria, recent research shows that homophobia, discrimination and heterosexism are commonly reported as the cause of undue stress for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people and can lead to invisibility and isolation, resulting in lowered self-esteem, depression and social withdrawal (Brown 2000).

For young people who experience same-sex attraction, reluctance to disclose their sexual orientation or identity and their fear of a possible negative response can manifest itself in health problems, school attendance interruptions, academic difficulties and increased psychological risk (D'Augelli and Hershberger 1993).

This reluctance and fear has also been reinforced in the links that are now well established between homophobia and youth suicide. Research reports that same-sex attracted young people are significantly more likely to attempt suicide than the population as a whole (Remafedi 1999; Bagley and Tremblay 1997). For those young people who are at risk in this regard, research suggests that most suicide attempts occur after self-identifying as gay, but prior to having a same-sex experience or coming out as gay (Victorian Department of Human Services 1998; Bagley and Tremblay 1997).

Youth suicide rates in Victoria have increased fourfold for males since 1964 and have doubled for females during the same period (Victorian Department of Human Services 1998). Such figures are of significant concern for same-sex attracted young people in rural areas who are known to be particularly at risk (Hillier et al 1998; Commonwealth Government 2000).

Issues for Rural Same-Sex Attracted Young People

For all young people living in rural areas, a number of specific challenges to wellbeing arise around issues such as transport, communication, access to services, accommodation, education and employment (Wyn, Stokes and Stafford 1998: 9-14).

For same-sex attracted young people in rural areas, the effects of isolation and marginalisation can be compounded. For, not only are these young people subject to factors that flow from institutionalised homophobia, such as bullying and violence, they also face the added challenges of inadequate access to support services that can make it safer for them to explore their sexuality issues, and an absence of appropriate and affirming social venues or networks. (See Stewart and Seale 2000).

The literature also suggests that there are often additional problematic dimensions to the experience of same-sex attracted young people living in rural areas that are important to consider. In *The Rural Mural,* a study of 860 young people in rural towns in Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania, for instance, it is reported that:

> homosexuals and lesbians in rural towns were a highly stigmatized group...It is difficult to imagine the anxiety which must be felt by the young lesbian and gay students in the research sample (Hillier, Warr and Haste 1996: 39-40).

Pointing to the social and cultural aspects of life in rural areas for young people, Wyn, Stokes and Stafford also comment that, while the conservatism, self reliance, close social networks and adherence to traditional values is a positive feature of rural communities for some young people, for others these social characteristics can also be detrimental, especially in relation to gender relations, sexuality and sexual identities (1998: 9).

Frameworks for Action

While documented levels of discrimination provide ample justification to support work around improving the experiences of SSAY, it is important to look to Federal and State policy documents, resources and legal frameworks that lend official support and direction to such work.

At the national level, *The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act (1986)* empowers the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) to investigate and engage in public education programs that aim to minimise the incidence of unlawful discrimination in the short and in the longer-term in Australia. Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation comes within the ambit of HREOC. HREOC, through the *Outlink Project*, has recently funded the production of the '*Not Round Here', Rural Service Providers Training Manual* (Miller and Mahamati 2000). The manual is an extensive kit of materials designed to challenge homophobia and affirm sexual diversity and is full of useful activities that could be used in various ways with young people and with service providers.

At the state level, the Victorian *Equal Opportunity Act 1995 makes* discrimination and harassment based on 17 personal characteristics (including gender identity and sexual orientation) unlawful in public life in Victoria. Recent amendments to this legislation that strengthened the rights of same-sex attracted and transgender young people send a clear message that discrimination on these grounds is unacceptable. The Equal Opportunity Commission of Victoria provides advice and training on issues related to discrimination under the Act.

For young people in Victoria, the Victorian Government is currently preparing *The Victorian Youth Strategy* that will frame the provision of youth services across Government. The section of the discussion paper dealing with *Valuing Diversity* states:

> The government is committed to ensuring that all young Victorians have an equal opportunity to participate in the full range of social, educational and cultural activities and it realises that due to a range of factors that some young people are disadvantaged in our community, and may require additional assistance (DEET 2001: 10).

In relation to education policy, the *Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Government Schools* (Directorate of Education; 1998) is the policy document that aims to increase student wellbeing in Government schools in Victoria and frames the provision of student welfare. The *Framework* suggests that student wellbeing is enhanced via building 'resilience' which is defined as "(the) capacity to cope with extreme and stressful life situations" (1998: 15). While some commentators have raised concerns that a resilience model places undue emphasis on individual rather than structural interventions (Wyn, Stokes and Stafford 1988: 20-1), the Directorate of Education *Framework* does suggest that resilience is enhanced within contexts, such as schools, that "(promote) a sense of belonging" (16). Furthermore, it states that "belonging" is enhanced within environments that are non-discriminatory and non-violent. The Department recognises, within the policy, the importance of school communities developing:

> [P]olicies and strategies concerning overcoming violence, victimization and harassment, racism and homophobia to increase a sense of belonging and security for students (DoE 1998: 17; see also Hillier, Harrison and Dempsey 1999: 61).

Other important school-based initiatives include *Health Promoting Schools*, *Mind Matters, Talking Sexual Health* and *Statewide Education and Training in Youth Suicide Prevention (STEP).*

The Australian *Health Promoting Schools* website quotes the World Health Organization as saying:

> Health promoting schools are schools which display, in everything they say and do, support for and commitment to enhancing the

emotional, social, physical and moral well being of all members of their school community (Australian Health Promoting Schools 2000).

The *Health Promoting Schools* model is presented as three overlapping areas – curriculum, teaching and learning; school organisation, ethos and environment; and partnerships and services. In each of these areas, principles that support equity of access, promotion of social and emotional health and creation of safe environments are primary (AHPSA 2000).

In another important mental health initiative, schools across Victoria are currently being resourced and trained for the implementation of *MindMatters*, a whole school approach to mental health promotion for all students. *MindMatters* resources include a series of books and a website designed to aid schools in adopting a whole school approach. These focus on issues such as prevention of self-harm and suicide, dealing with bullying and harassment, stress and coping, and understanding mental illness. Current materials will be complemented in 2002 with a resource on supporting special groups of young people, including those who are same-sex attracted. *MindMatters* encourages schools to develop effective partnerships with each other, and with education, public health and mental health agencies at federal, state, local and community levels. The emphasis in curriculum units is on encouraging students to look at ways in which they can promote a culture in which bullying and harassment is not acceptable.

Talking Sexual Health: National Framework for Education about Sexually Transmitted Diseases, HIV/AIDS and Blood Borne Viruses in Secondary Schools offers teaching and learning, professional development and parent's resources which have been developed by Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society (ARCSHS) for the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care. They offer a very useful framework and funded support for work around sexual diversity in schools.

Furthermore, the Victorian Department of Human Services' Mental Health Promotion Officers coordinate the delivery of *Statewide Education and Training in Youth Suicide Prevention (STEP)* training. This was a project developed by the Victorian Child and Adolescent Mental Health Network funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care as part of the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy. The purpose of STEP is to develop and deliver training activities in youth suicide prevention to workers with three high risk groups: Aboriginal young people, same-sex attracted young people, and young people who are refugees.

While there is a need for more resources, materials and policies in this area, these existing federal and state frameworks can be drawn upon by those workers interested in making changes in their local areas.

The Next Step...

Overall, the literature is disturbing and suggests that same-sex attracted young people encounter many difficulties within schools, the youth sector and other settings as they attempt to take up space in the world in different ways. While some of the literature highlights the strategies that SSAY develop to negotiate the often hostile environments that they encounter, what is undeniable is that the social contexts that young people inhabit often encourage social practices that can impact on them in negative ways.

Discriminatory social practices are learnt and enacted within environments that support such practices. Heteronormative cultures (cultures that privilege heterosexuality) generate homophobia. In order to minimise or eradicate homophobic violence therefore, it is essential to look towards those structural factors, including those that privilege heterosexuality and seek to constrain sexual diversity. Work that aims to lessen the discrimination that SSAY experience needs to proceed from that base.

It is also crucial to acknowledge that while SSAY, and those assumed to be SSAY, are often directly targeted by homophobic practices, reactive and oppressive attitudes impact on all of the members of a particular community whether they be SSAY or not. Homophobic social practices, which are supported and enabled within heterosexist cultures, limit everyone's sense of wellbeing.

The Key Learnings that have emerged from this study of the projects funded under the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme* will assist local communities to start to address some of the structural factors that generate homophobic harassment and that minimise the wellbeing of all.

Key Learnings

The approach taken in this report has been to draw together the diverse strategies pursued by projects funded under the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme,* through the identification of key themes, trends, tools and learnings. Such an approach has enabled us to focus on both the challenges and the opportunities that project workers have encountered in their efforts to reduce the prejudice, discrimination and violence faced by young same-sex attracted people in their local communities.

The *Key Learnings* fall into seven main areas, all of which are discussed in detail in the sections to follow.

Values

The first of these sections is entitled *Values*. It looks at some of the key assumptions that underpin the projects and the ways that certain concepts have affected the design and implementation of local interventions. Despite the wide variety of project types and locational settings, a degree of commonality was found, particularly in relation to whether issues of same-sex attractedness should be 'mainstreamed'.

Community Readiness

The second section, *Community Readiness,* examines the ways in which project workers and managers determined how prepared their local area was in relation to addressing the issues facing same-sex attracted young people. It focuses on the history of service delivery in related areas, the existence of relevant infrastructure and networks, and the importance of community leadership and ownership.

Participation of Young People

Thirdly, we look at the engagement of young people, families and other community members in the development and implementation of strategies. Entitled *Participation of Young People,* this section documents various activities undertaken by project workers to involve their target groups, including same-sex attracted young people, and highlights the difficulties and risks associated with recruitment in rural areas.

Implementation

In the fourth section, attention is given to the detail of project design and implementation as a range of tools and strategies are examined. Once again, while the diversity of projects meant that activities varied considerably from place to place, a number of common challenges and opportunities can be identified. Under the title *Implementation,* these are discussed in relation to the possibilities of collaboration or partnerships

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between different organisations and the place of broader government policy as a framework for specific local actions. Also critical in this context are questions of time, resources, flexibility and sustainability.

School Settings

Given the significant emphasis placed on working within schools on issues for same-sex attracted young people, section five, *School Settings*, is focussed specifically on school-based issues. It discusses issues such as access, parent attitudes and school policy.

Worker Wellbeing

Consistent across all respondents was concern for the wellbeing of those engaged in what is at times risky work. *Worker Wellbeing* is the sixth section in which key questions of worker isolation, support, resources and safety are addressed. For employees and volunteers involved in projects, a number of implications in their working and personal lives became apparent as the projects developed.

Media

The final section, *Media*, discusses the importance of media and communication strategies in relation to all projects funded under the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme*. Centrally linked to questions of community readiness, the need to strategically position projects in relation to local (and statewide) media became a central issue for VicHealth as well as for individual projects.

Key Learnings

■ Spend time clarifying the core values of the project – these will shape all aspects of project design and implementation.

■ Be clear about what you mean when you use key concepts such as 'gender' and 'sexuality'. These can mean different things to different people.

■ Make sure the core values and key concepts are expressed in ways that make sense in the local community.

■ Focus on striking the right balance for your community between the promotion of sexual diversity and the prevention of homophobic behaviours.

■ Recognise that young people are not homogeneous – different groups of young people have different needs.

The values that underpin the development of a project addressing the needs of same-sex attracted young people in rural areas are critically important. Taking time to think through the project's understanding of concepts such as sexuality, gender and diversity is key, particularly given that these concepts need to be expressed in ways that make sense in the local area. That is, they need to make sense in the complex and varied contexts of family, school and community life.

A range of different value-based approaches was evident in the project designs funded under the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme*. While some projects had a very clearly articulated philosophical underpinning, framed primarily in terms such as a 'community development', 'holistic' or 'whole-of-school' approach, other projects had not developed their frameworks or defined their working concepts to the same extent. This provided a challenge in terms of drawing out Key Learnings across the projects for, not only did we have a range of interventions and a range of settings, we also had many different values and concepts driving the projects, expressed to differing degrees. One project worker highlighted this point, indicating that they would have welcomed the opportunity to talk through some of the assumptions and values held by projects at the outset of the funding round. They felt that this would have helped the

project workers to find a common language in which they could exchange ideas. Drawing on this point, in this section we will discuss some of the key questions that did come up in project design and examine the ways in which these questions were played out at the local level.

Overall, project workers were well able to articulate their longer-term broad goals, and to suggest what at times was a very exciting and positive vision for same-sex attracted young people in rural areas. They wanted to "put same-sex issues on the agenda". While this was certainly about "doing anything you can to address the silence", it was also about "making a whole lot of noise". Importantly, the VicHealth *MHPP* was seen to provide a useful framing device in which issues could be raised in new and positive ways.

> This feels like a really pro-active funding strategy. The *Mental Health Strategy* has lots of suggestions about changing the environment, not necessarily changing the individual. And of course the problem for these young people is not necessarily them. That's so important.

In deciding the core values of a project and in working out how to promote the underpinning concepts to the key players in the local area, respondents emphasised the importance of taking

into account the need to work with (and to continuously build on) existing community strengths. In part, this required a decision on the part of the project worker on the way in which they would locate the project in community discussion, or indeed how they would 'sell' the project to key parts of the community. In other words, project designers and workers had to make a decision about their own conceptual packaging, particularly whether they would openly promote their projects as being about sexual diversity, or whether they would try and embed the project within other approaches to diversity or sexuality including those focussed on health, safety or anti-discrimination. While this decision did not necessarily need to affect the overarching vision of a project, it did certainly affect the initial framing of project goals and the development of specific strategy objectives. It became clear that the core values and concepts shaped all aspects of project design and implementation.

Diversity

Respondents recognised to differing degrees the need to think about differences between young people. Of particular importance in the context of these projects were issues of sexual identity and gender identity. Other important issues that were raised were differences of ethnicity and class, particularly in relation to access to services and religious and family constraints. On the whole, project workers did not feel able to address these with the limited resources that were available.

The inter-related nature of sexuality and gender mean that questions of femininity and masculinity needed to be closely integrated with discussions of sexuality. Indeed, respondents pointed to what they saw as a significant knowledge-gap among people who work with young people about the complexities of gender and the importance of seeing a range of femininities and masculinities. There was a continuing tendency to rely upon stereotypes and to assume that an effeminate young man was probably gay and, conversely, that a masculine young woman was probably a

lesbian. In the experience of a number of project workers, these fundamental issues continue to require significant attention.

> There are big gender issues in harassment, and same-sex attraction can often be seen as gender-based rather than het/homo. There's a crossover between gender and sexuality. They're definitely related, but the differences need to be sorted out as well.

Addressing such issues therefore starts with unpacking our concepts of gender and recognising that young men and young women can sit at a range of points on the masculinity/femininity continuum, and that this may or may not be related to their sexual identity. Such a step may also enable project workers to start to address the needs of young people with emerging gender identity issues (young transgender people). Despite their inclusion in project funding specifications, no specific interventions were designed to meet the needs of this group of young people.

A further implication of the relationship between sexuality and gender is that of the relative invisibility of young women in rural areas, including in relation to issues of sexuality. A number of project workers noted the invisibility of young same-sex attracted women in the minds of their local community members.

> I think when most people around here think about same-sex attraction, they mostly think about boys. Young lesbians are almost invisible.

What this issue emphasises is the need to be aware of differences between same-sex attracted young people, including in relation to gender, and the importance of taking such differences into account in the development of targeted intervention strategies.

The literature review also highlighted the importance of not automatically assigning identity positions such as 'lesbian', 'gay' or 'bisexual' to young people attracted to others of the same

sex or 'transgender' to young people with emerging gender identity issues. Once again, many project workers demonstrated their awareness of these issues, seeing them as a driving concern from the outset.

> Same-sex attraction is a broad experience of a lot of young people. Whether or not they later identify as gay or lesbian is not what its about. It's a normal function of sexuality and can be experienced in a whole range of ways. We were about raising the issue with schools that, flowing through all their practices, it's important to remember that not all kids are het[erosexual], not all parents are het[erosexual].

In response to this issue, a number of project workers specifically developed value frameworks in which concepts of diversity and difference were the drivers, with sexual diversity an integral element of diversity. In this way, young people were not required to make decisions about whether or not they identified as lesbian or gay, but could feel safe to explore options in the context of the project.

> Our instinct was to look at the issue of diversity in general, rather than sexuality-specific diversity at this stage. In our experience, not many young people will identify as gay or lesbian, but if open to difference they're more likely to feel safe to explore that path.

Mainstreaming

When responding to the needs of same-sex attracted young people in rural areas, it was difficult for project workers to decide how to balance the positive promotion of sexual diversity with other important issues such as bullying, harassment and discrimination. Another way of phrasing this dilemma, common across most projects, was whether or not to 'mainstream' the project, that is, whether to embed it in topics that have a history of acceptability, or whether to keep it separate and,

by implication, 'non-mainstream'. While many respondents had anticipated this issue, for others it came as a bit of a surprise. This was mainly due to a mis-judgement by some project workers on how prepared their particular community was for positive action on sexual diversity.

Getting the balance right, however, is not without its costs and proved for some to be quite a difficult process to go through.

> Schools seem to be able to accept anti-discrimination or anti-bullying frameworks much more readily. But they do not seem to be willing to let the voice of same-sex attracted young people be heard. This is seen as promoting homosexuality and is therefore problematic. Therefore, we had to package the project differently, in a more acceptable framework. This feels really deceitful. It feels like we are giving in to homophobic views and needs – compromising the spirit of the project.

A further complication arose given that many of the acceptable frameworks in which same-sex attracted people can be discussed centre on problems caused by homophobia. They are frameworks in which same-sex attracted young people run the risk of being seen as problems, in contrast to frameworks that focus on the positives of sexual diversity and same-sex attractedness.

> It's quite hard to go about it without pathologising same-sex attracted young people. We don't want to only focus on HIV/AIDS and suicide – although these are incredibly important issues. It's a fine line with mental health. You've got to get the balance right. It's about diversity versus violence and discrimination.

Softly-Softly

So how did project workers get the balance right? One of the main ways that they did this was through what was named the 'softly-softly' approach.

It strikes me again in this project that it really is a softly-softly approach. And it really is about bringing everyone along. You can't run your own little race in the hope that others are going to keep up with you. We're about doing radical things conservatively. We all want to change the world but we don't want to stick our necks out too far in the process. And we want the change to have a really lasting impact.

Closely linked with this softly-softly approach was the importance of starting where a positive response was expected. This often included the development of strategic links with existing organisations, programs and activities to provide a springboard for a project.

We started with groups we knew would be supportive. There's no use holding information sessions for the general public without warming up to it.

These tactics are about minimising confrontation and about working steadily and incrementally on introducing the core values and key concepts of a project to participating organisations and communities. As one person put it: "The response has been pretty good. As long as I'm not all guns blazing".

Frameworks

In line with such an approach, project workers made extensive use of existing policies and resource material in relation to issues of anti-discrimination, harassment, bullying, sexual health, HIV/AIDS and suicide, particularly in school settings. And, as framing devices, project workers also relied on the use of broader discussions of sexuality in which same-sex attractedness could be framed:

If you put it within the subject of sexuality as such and deal with it in that way, well, then the kids tend to accept it. Then it's a lot easier to tease out the issues. Same-sex attractedness is part of sexuality.

And also, the broader framework of diversity and difference more generally:

Our philosophy is to look at same-sex attracted young people in the broader context of celebrating difference. Thinking that information, education, exposure to issues will have an impact on young people. They will make up their own minds.

All of this discussion is really about the key question of how 'up-front' project workers needed to be in relation to their same-sex attracted target group. Put broadly, the decision about being 'up-front' was highly mediated by the degree of community readiness and the specificity of the institutional setting, with schools being particularly difficult in a number of projects. Almost all respondents reported modifying their approach and language to some degree in the course of their project in order to accommodate the needs of the people they were working with.

My agenda is about same-sex attracted young people. I wanted to put that up front. But I wanted to look for opportunities to see it more broadly than that – frankly I wouldn't have got very far with my schools if I hadn't done that.

In one case, a number of schools were approached to participate in the project in one region but only two responded positively. According to the project worker, while most of the schools approached were happy to take on the general interventions around student wellbeing, they were very reluctant to take any action on same-sex attraction. While the approach to the school had been very explicit that the project had a target group of same-sex attracted young people, they had also stressed that they were very prepared to go through a slow and developmental process with the school and work up to the issues in an incremental way. According to the project worker:

A few got quite freaked out. A few other schools fell off. They weren't explicit about why they fell off. They didn't want to be

discriminatory. But if you read between the lines. in one school welfare staff were keen but the principal was scared. There was great trepidation.

What this seems to suggest is that, even with a 'softly-softly' approach, there is still significant resistance to moving on the issues affecting same-sex attracted young people in many areas. Tactics suggested so far have included approaching the issue more broadly within either sexuality or diversity frameworks, and linking to existing policies and programs. All the while keeping in mind that all communities and organisations are different, requiring locally tailored approaches.

> When working with different communities you need to be really strategic, to embed the measure in the broad community. It's a community concern. We need to unpack why it is so problematic for a particular community.

Even though it may not be easy, raising the issues did have a number of positive flow-on effects for many projects, particularly as it named an issue for the community and gave people in the community permission to act in a way that may not have been possible before.

> Sometimes it's like opening a door. By going in you give someone permission inside to do what they have wanted to do for a while.

COMMUNITY READINESS

Key Learnings

■ A community is never 'not ready'.

■ Different communities are at different stages of readiness in relation to addressing the needs of same-sex attracted young people. A combination of bottom-up community development and top-down government and organisational leadership is required.

■ Local research is essential to determine the stage of community readiness and to develop strategies for opening up spaces for action.

■ Building on existing infrastructure will minimise isolation, increase effectiveness and community ownership and maximise long-term sustainability.

■ The establishment of a local reference group was a key success factor for many projects.

The idea of 'community readiness' has been used in order to explore the varied aspects of community life that will affect whether or not a specific intervention to meet the needs of young same-sex attracted people will be appropriate to a particular area.

In the previous section we saw how aspects of a project's value base and the ways in which it sells itself to participating organisations can affect how successful it will be. In this section we look specifically at what we mean when we say a community is 'ready' to act. In particular, we look at ways to build on existing community strengths, drawing from notions of bottom-up community development. We argue that all communities are 'ready' to some degree – and in fact all communities need to act. The important task for project workers is to ensure that the interventions correctly gauge the type of intervention that will be most effective, in line with the specific stage of community preparedness.

However, the thorny issue remains regarding what approaches are needed in communities that may not see themselves as 'ready' for action but within which same-sex attracted young people are not receiving adequate support or space. These are the communities that need to be directly encouraged or required to act in ways that will enhance the wellbeing of their young people. Here we see some necessity for a top-down approach, with leadership possibly

coming from a range of sources, including through cross-departmental government support. As one respondent put it:

> These issues are now on the agenda. The government needs to learn how to take the lead and make reluctant communities act.

Diverse Communities

It is important to recognise that not all communities are at the same stage of development in their response to the needs of same-sex attracted young people. This is reflected in part in the differences between small towns, large regional centres and remote communities. It is also reflected in different political and cultural attitudes towards difference and diversity. However, all of this does not mean that we cannot see patterns emerging, or come to some shared learnings. As one project worker put it:

> We're all very different communities. And we all have very different approaches. We all have special interests but we can come together and share without losing our individuality. We can learn from each other.

One of the results of the tendency to homogenise the many and varied types of rural communities is a risk of stereotyping all rural areas as backward and homophobic. While all project workers agreed that there was much that

could be improved, the overall impression was that attitudes to homosexuality were getting better, albeit not as quickly as might be hoped. As one respondent said:

> One real challenge when you're dealing with rural areas is not to stereotype. There's probably this image of country areas being horrifically homophobic and they probably are but at the same time its not like we're in the Stone Ages.

The instigation of the *Sexual Diversity* projects certainly engendered strong community responses in some cases, including through the local media. It is important, therefore, to acknowledge that a certain level of homophobic resistance was encountered in some areas and that this was brought to the surface by the work of the project in airing the issues of same-sex attracted young people.

> That's what happens in this place. You put homosexuality on the front page and suddenly everyone is screaming, "You can't do that".

And, if anyone was ever in any doubt of the very real impact of such attitudes on young same-sex attracted community members, the fact that these young people often have to leave the area in order to come 'out' speaks for itself.

> It seems to be that the only homosexual people you meet are those who have grown up and left town.

> Lots of teachers up here say, "Oh, I've never met a gay or lesbian student". Wonder why? They think that there's no problem because most people when they come out they move to Melbourne. That's such a cop out. Its like saying "Being gay is fine by us. Just not in our backyard".

Despite such concerns, and despite recognition of differences between levels of community readiness, there was unanimous agreement that attitudes are changing and that it is now time to act on these issues.

> There are good opportunities in rural areas. They have been hit hard, it brings them close together and communities are concerned about their young people. They've experienced the loss of their young people in very real ways.

> It's a pivotal time for our community. People are slowly becoming empowered and they're saying gay and lesbian pride matters. All these terrific people all over Victoria. And they're getting more assertive, they want more resources.

What becomes critical is extensive research on the local climate and collaborative work with key local agencies and community leaders. In this way, the existence of a project is able to generate goodwill, draw on existing agency credibility and increase the possibility of community ownership and long-term sustainability. In addition to working in a bottom-up, locally-directed fashion, it is critical to conceptualise and promote the project in a way that is appropriate to local needs. As one respondent said:

> There are a lot of political issues of working with the community. Understanding the climate of the area. Pitching it where the community is at.

And, advice from one project worker:

> Don't get too angry. Once you understand how people have developed behaviours or thinking you can understand and work from there. You know, understanding the community and the parents.

Existing Infrastructure and Networks

One important part of community readiness is the capacity and willingness of existing organisations and networks to be drawn into the development and implementation of a local strategic response. In large part this is about

building on existing community strengths, validating what is already happening, and avoiding the necessity of coming in cold on an issue. Failure to work with existing community infrastructure runs the risk of the project being isolated, not being as effective as it could have been and being unsustainable in the longer term.

One project described the process of generating community commitment to the issue as the most successful outcome of their strategy. While establishing the contacts and gaining the trust and collaboration of those involved took much longer than anticipated, the results were worthwhile, particularly in terms of long-term sustainability. Achieving this outcome requires time, resources (for example to attend meetings across a region) and persistence.

> For same-sex attracted young people we needed to identify the points of entry. This is not obvious in a small town. You have to think of everyone who should be involved. This means lots of time, lots of talking and lots of trust.

Again, communities are at different stages of readiness and have hugely variant levels of community infrastructure to draw on. For a number of project workers, the existing response to same-sex attracted young people was minimal.

> The issue has been addressed in isolated pockets in a bit of a hit and miss manner. Its wrong to say it's never been addressed but generally it's not discussed very often and only in a minimal way.

> I was looking for the gaps in services, issues that hadn't been addressed and same-sex attraction was one of them. There is very little full stop in our corner of Victoria.

For others, the infrastructure was better developed.

> A lot of the basis had already been set up in terms of relationships with organisations. The

school had already said we could go ahead if we got the funding.

> We looked for opportunities when deciding where to do our project. We picked one with an active youth planning forum, where some groundwork had already been done so that a project like this could be proposed in the first instance.

> Our local area had a strong network, lots of local contacts. What the project has done is give the network a focus, get us meeting specifically over the issues for same-sex attracted young people in this area.

One of the most successful aspects of the projects funded under the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme* was the ability to work in flexible and innovative ways with existing community infrastructure. And, as the above quotes suggest, at times this meant that the project played a key role in getting key existing organisations to focus their attention on issues for same sex-attracted young people in their areas. In sum:

> You have to look at what's already in place and then piggyback. Work with other organisations, more piggybacks.

Community Ownership and Leadership

Given the recognition that communities are at different stages in relation to action on these issues, the importance of local involvement at all stages is key. It is important to give communities the opportunity to discuss the issues and to come up with ways in which they can be addressed in locally relevant ways. The need to plan for this development, and to allow adequate time and resources in the project budget, was seen as essential.

Project workers emphasised the importance of researching issues locally and taking the time to identify and listen to local leaders. A number of project workers established local reference groups, made up of various combinations of local

youth organisations, schools, police, health services, state government representatives and gay and lesbian community members. The establishment of a reference group or project management team was at times linked to existing youth planning initiatives. The commitment to locally-based management served to increase the stake of community organisations and leaders in the project and also to increase the possibility that the issue will continue to retain a central focus of a community after the end of the funding round. Being strategic about setting up the reference group was emphasised as a key to successful project implementation:

> Our reference group was handpicked. We were strategic about who was on. They were good committed individuals, who were happy to facilitate other links.

In large part, this process is about identifying and forging links with key players in the area, who are able to influence others in a range of relevant ways.

Key Learnings

■   Working towards the participation of young people in rural areas requires additional resources to meet the costs of practical needs such as transport and communication.

■   Participation can be risky for young people in rural communities due to issues of confidentiality and lack of access to appropriate and affordable support services.

■   Locating the project under the auspices of a well established and continuing service (such as a local health or youth-focussed service) that had the resources and commitment to provide ongoing support to young people at the close of the project was useful.

■   A focus on skills development through the production of resources (posters, pamphlets and internet sites) and through drama was a very successful way of encouraging participation of young people.

■   Participation of young people takes place in the context of families, caregivers and communities – broad education and awareness campaigns are essential.

As discussed in the literature review, the realities of rural life compound many of the issues faced by same-sex attracted young people in relation to isolation and access to support. This was very evident in the limited degree to which projects that were not school-based were able to include young people in their planning processes and in their activities. Key issues that affected participation included lack of transport, inadequate access to technology (particularly the cost of information technology) and minimal social opportunities. Project workers generally agreed that these issues made it more difficult for young people to participate in any activities, including those addressing difference and diversity, which were seen to be relatively risky. Creating safe opportunities for participation of same-sex attracted young people in rural areas therefore requires significant additional resources to address practical concerns (such as transport) and issue-specific safety concerns (such as adequate counselling and support). Describing the importance of these issues, respondents said:

> It's difficult for young people to feel like they have somewhere to go, someone to talk to in rural areas.

> Some of us really love living in the country but it's one of the toughest places to be gay,

especially for young people. How can they get together? Make friends? It's all so much harder.

Risk

Given the different degrees of community readiness discussed in the previous section, and the continuing existence of homophobic attitudes across a range of areas, the risk of participation for young people in projects that address sexual diversity is high. This was seen to be of particular importance in isolated, small communities that struggle with inadequate access to services and lack of confidentiality.

> Small populations are really hard. At least a bigger population can have a support group, at least that's someone to talk to. In a small town where do you go as a young gay person to socialise even if you do manage to find some sort of network?

As a result of these issues, project workers addressed questions of participation in different ways. Although all respondents emphasised the importance of young people's participation in addressing the issues, many project workers indicated that the level of resources required to provide adequate opportunities and back-up support was beyond the scope of the project

funding. Closely linked to questions of the longer-term sustainability of particular initiatives, respondents were concerned about raising issues and then pulling back without leaving adequate support infrastructure in place to meet the ongoing needs of young people in the area. As one worker put it:

> It's important to not make it worse. To raise the issues and then bail out. We so don't want to leave it and make it worse for young people.

As discussed earlier under *Values*, framing projects more broadly in terms of 'sexuality' or 'diversity' can be a critical step in minimising this risk. This was a strategy that was seen to work particularly well for those project workers who were focussed on mainstream agencies and schools. It was not, however, always successful. As the following quote from a school-based project worker suggests, even when sexual diversity is part of a much larger diversity-driven project, the levels of resistance can still be high.

> I was getting volunteers to participate. Getting kids to put their name down. When he saw 'sexual diversity' he just said 'No way'. 'No way' and walked off.

For those projects that were specifically targeting the participation of same-sex attracted young people, additional steps were required to ensure the wellbeing of young people who did identify themselves to workers and to make it as safe as possible for them to explore issues around sexuality. A very important step in this regard was locating the project under the auspices of a well established and continuing service (such as a local health or youth-focussed service) that had the resources and commitment to provide ongoing support to young people at the close of the project. Other initiatives included the establishment of safe and confidential places in which young people could access material about sexuality. These locations included private spaces within community health centres and schools, and included access to a computer thus enabling

young people to have access to the resources available on the World Wide Web.

Skills and Planning

A number of participation strategies explicitly placed young people at the centre of the planning process.

> I'm a big fan of letting young people decide how they want their support group to look. Let them think about how they might like to support each other.

It was very evident from the range of projects funded that a focus on skills development through the production of resources (posters, pamphlets and internet sites) and through drama was a very successful way of encouraging participation of young people, including same-sex attracted young people. The comments from respondents involved in these sorts of activities were very positive, both in the effect of participation on young people and also the impact of such activities in local communities.

> They get to challenge their internal homophobia. They become role models for each other.

Families

This raises the importance of acknowledging the context of families, caregivers and other significant people in young people's lives. Many project workers recognised this, stressing the importance of working with families and general community education interventions. While limited resources meant that many projects were not able to do this sort of work to the degree that they would have liked to, this did not mean that they thought it unimportant. On the contrary, it was regarded as essential for long-term social change.

IMPLEMENTATION

Key Learnings

- Collaborative relationships between key local agencies are critical for the set-up phase and the longer-term sustainability of a project.

- Strong program infrastructure support and linkages between projects in different regions will increase a project's capacity to be effective.

- Given the sensitive nature of the issues, projects need to be flexible in responding to community concerns as they arise, and to tailor their project accordingly.

- Work incrementally and ensure that you are bringing your community along with you. Push the boundaries but don't break them.

- A combination of local knowledge and outsider expertise can prove to be a very powerful tool for highlighting the importance of the issues.

- Credible, respected organisations (such as VicHealth) provided permission to raise concerns around same-sex attracted young people.

- Given the extent of unmet need identified by the projects, more time and more money would have been well placed.

- Overall, more resources are needed to ensure the viability and sustainability of programs targeting same-sex attracted young people in rural communities.

The twelve projects funded under the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme* are all very different from one another both structurally (in terms of the types of organisations that have auspiced them) and operationally (in terms of their own action plans). This is made clear in the detailed description of projects provided in *Appendix A*.

One factor that unites all projects, however, is the commitment of agencies and individuals to the successful implementation of the project and to seeing some positive outcomes for same-sex attracted young people in their local area. As one respondent said:

> Whatever we choose to do, we'll be successful because of the drive of the agencies.

While this is positive for the projects and for the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme* as a whole, it does mean that the outcomes achieved in a range of areas are a result of activity that went well beyond that for which the agency or organisation was originally funded. This has been due largely

to top-up funds provided by agencies (including additional staff time) and also due to the volunteer labour of many committed individuals.

Over the one-year term of the projects, many changes were made to the strategies and activities of a number of projects. This was due, in the main, to changing understandings of community readiness in relation to specific activities developed through the implementation process. However, within this flexible approach, the broad longer-term goals of improving the wellbeing of same-sex attracted young people remained very constant.

> We've made lots of changes to our plans but our broad goals, to strengthen community support around same-sex attracted young people, are not unrealistic. With a community development approach you expect twists and turns.

> The main goal – attitudinal change – hasn't changed. The project is very process oriented, every stage is critical. The outcomes are

important for each stage in the process. We learn from them. We take them one at a time.

In this section, discussion will focus on a number of key points highlighted by respondents as important learnings in relation to the implementation of their strategies. These key points are grouped into three main issues: partnerships, resources and sustainability.

Partnerships

There was widespread recognition among respondents that a partnership or collaborative approach was essential for a number of reasons. Firstly, with limited resources, working in collaborative arrangements enabled project mangers to stretch their dollars further, drawing support and additional resources from other linked agencies. As well as being resource-effective, such an approach was entirely consistent with the community development values expressed by project workers, contributing to community ownership and project sustainability. In fact, a number of respondents indicated that it would simply not be possible to work without collaboration between key local agencies or organisations.

At a second level, partnerships were developed between local agencies and statewide or Melbourne-based organisations. This was important to the success of the projects for a number of reasons. Most particularly, it enabled a strategic combination of locally-based knowledge and networks with sexuality-specific expertise (much of which is based in Melbourne). Indeed, a number of project workers indicated that they would not have been able to do their project without such a partnership approach.

> We needed that collaboration. Between the locally respected worker and the centrally well-respected institution. Local expertise and networks plus researchers with sexuality experience.

> Partnerships made the shift to rural areas much easier. In local areas the contacts were

invaluable. We would not have been able to do it without them.

From the perspective of both the local and central agency, these partnerships proved to be highly effective. For central agencies, the advantages included the strength of local research and knowledge, access to important networks and an ability to read the political climate and work effectively with both local constraints and opportunities. For local agencies, eliciting support from external agencies was found to lend weight to the project, with the addition of outside expertise increasing community interest and commitment. Some projects specifically indicated that importing Melbourne-based expertise was seen as absolutely essential for successful local professional development activities. Not only can 'outsiders' provide expert input, they can at times raise issues that would be very difficult for someone who will continue to live and work in the local area to raise. As one worker put it:

> If you want to change attitudes you must have local involvement. Outsiders can come in as a resource rather than as the local change agent.

One issue that did arise, however, in regard to the relationship between outside agencies and schools was the problem that outside agencies can at times be seen to remove from schools the responsibility of having to act directly on issues for same-sex attracted young people. One project described this as a bit of trap that needs to be addressed if long term sustainability and changes to school practices are to be achieved.

> One trap is that we don't want schools to take outside agencies as a substitute for good teaching practice. Agencies have a role but kids think its different if it's done by outsiders, it's outside of the normal range of things. Teachers should be doing it as a normal part of school, supported by outside agencies. But schools just find it too hard. This leads to two problems. Firstly, an unrealistic expectation of agencies

(who have to 'do' sexuality in a two hours session) and, secondly, there's no follow-up.

Finally, networks and collaborative relationships between project workers and gay and lesbian organisations such as ALSO (Alternative Lifestyle Organisation), PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), Context (a group of teachers and youth workers who work with same-sex attracted young people) and the VAC (Victorian AIDS Council) were also seen as very important. These organisations supported projects in various ways including through the provision of print resources, advice and by participating as volunteer speakers and workshop facilitators.

Resources

All respondents were clear that further levels of funding, and a longer funding period, would have enabled them to go further towards meeting the needs of same-sex attracted young people in their local area. They applauded VicHealth for moving on the issue and hoped that further funding would become available to enable them to continue their important work. As has been indicated, however, most project workers found that the funding provided had not covered the costs of the project. One of the Key Learnings in relation to this for projects was, quite simply, that the implementation of a number of specific interventions had been much more time consuming and much more expensive than anticipated. Projects were subjected to a number of unanticipated setbacks (particularly in response to negative media discussion of the initiatives) and had to spend significant additional time and money on increasing community readiness to act on the issues. Respondents made the following observations in relation to time and resources:

> You have to be so focussed to get it done within the time and money. There's so much to do and so little time and money. It does open up a can of worms. We could be doing some huge stuff, there's such a range of unmet need.

The timeline is just too short. It's at least a two to three year thing. It's one piece in a long-term, much larger process. Change in schools is a five or ten-year process, maybe closer to ten.

> We couldn't do it with the VicHealth only funding. We've had to top-up from other sources.

Such concerns notwithstanding, receiving VicHealth funding did provide the opportunity for organisations to put the issue on the agenda in a way that was welcomed. VicHealth backing provided a mandate to raise concerns around same-sex attracted young people in new arenas. This was seen as very valuable, and as an important first step in changing rural environments to improve the wellbeing of these young people. As one worker said:

> With twenty grand in twelve months we can't necessarily change the world but we can make a start.

Sustainability

Project workers were only too aware that this area is very under-resourced. Seeking to give their initiatives (or spin-offs from their initiatives) a lifespan of longer than one year was centrally important.

> I think the issues have been raised and I don't want them to just go away. The question becomes how to keep them on the agenda now that the money's run out.

> We'll have to keep building on our outcomes after the project. Otherwise you've done a flurry and what for? And I hesitate a bit. Because if you do a flurry and no follow up then you give the critics the chance to say, "Well, we're done with that nonsense". And it's back to normal life and subtle discrimination.

Strategies around sustainability are integrally linked to those discussed in previous sections in relation to values and community readiness. The

role of the *Sexual Diversity* funding to raise the issues around both the need to work with same-sex attracted young people and the barriers faced in doing this has been very important for participating organisations. Respondents expressed hope that the time spent in building relationships and promoting the importance of these issues will result in a continued commitment to act on the part of local communities. Further, a number of project produced resources including websites and printed material that have a lifespan reaching far beyond funded worker time.

Some concerns do remain, however, with a number of project workers expressing anxiety both in relation to their own job security and also in relation to the secure future of the initiatives they have instigated.

> Now I'm left in no-man's land. All these things have been put in place and we just don't know what will happen next.

This concern also manifested itself in unease with the short-term, one-off nature of the *Sexual Diversity Grants Program* as a whole. Some project workers felt that by injecting an insufficient amount of money into a community for a small project, there was always the risk that more damage than good could have been done, particularly for those projects that did not have sufficient backing from large, long-term funded organisations. This raises the important issue of the need for strong program infrastructure support in funding of this type and the importance of developing ongoing linkages between projects operating in diverse regions. Strengthening these elements of the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme* would, it was felt, have minimised the isolation and increased the effectiveness of all of the projects.

On the positive side, two project managers have successfully applied for further funding that specifically builds on the initiatives undertaken as part of their *Sexual Diversity Grants* project. Other project managers have further funding submissions

in process. This is a very positive outcome and goes part way to addressing what one respondent described as the big challenge: "to keep them keeping a target on same-sex attraction."

To address concerns of sustainability, and to improve the opportunity of long-term funding and long-term change, respondents emphasised the importance of continuing to lobby for improved government support.

> We need more statewide or peak bodies being advocates. More ministerial and department support. Perhaps more work could be done prior to the next funding round to get commitment from all levels and areas of government.

Key Learnings

■ Despite fears expressed by some schools, there was no negative parental backlash experienced in any of the projects.

■ Schools tend to work conservatively on these issues – projects need to be developed slowly and incrementally. Building strong foundations through good background work and research was essential.

■ Identifying leaders and allies in the school community is very important – at all levels of the school hierarchy.

■ Establish positive relationships with parents through school councils and other parent networks.

■ Engaging central and regional support from the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) is critical.

■ Point to the role of the project in value-adding to school resources.

■ Working with more than one school in a region improves the probability of other schools being involved in and supporting the project.

■ Look for relevant policy frameworks to back up your work. Policy frameworks can be a way of emphasising the importance of action on issues for same-sex attracted young people, including the responsibility of schools to provide a safe environment for their students.

All projects had some degree of interaction with the schools in their region. Activities involving schools included: seeking permission to make resource material available within school grounds, getting staff involved in professional development, examining and developing school policy, providing curriculum material to students and working with students to both devise and present theatre productions and internet sites. While some projects were based primarily on a collaborative partnership arrangement with local schools, for others they were part of a broader community strategy. For all projects, however, getting the support of the school at some level was seen as a very important indicator of success.

Access

As discussed previously, the value-base of a project, including the way in which it is conceptually framed, has a very significant impact on how it is received by different groups. Schools are no exception to this process, and all respondents found that the ways in which they promoted their activities was critically important.

> You need to be able to articulate the benefits and the risks to the school. Need to identify resources. Need to think about how to frame the issues – Welfare? Health? Discrimination?

And it is clearly not a case of one size fits all as, even within projects, the approaches to different schools had to be modified depending on their readiness to deal with the issues.

> At one school in particular we have a history of homophobic attitudes so we need to be quite covert. It's useful to come in under a 'welfare' umbrella.

A second key element was the need to proceed slowly, mirroring the 'softly-softly' approach identified as key to successful community engagement.

We were aiming for long-term environmental change. Taking it quietly and slowly. Building relationships, building resources in the school, getting the issues into curriculum.

We needed to identify the common factor in what we would do in schools. Some get scared off if the approach is too upfront. Need to demystify the issues, put them at ease. It's a long process engaging them.

Another key selling point for schools was the opportunity offered by projects to add to their own limited resources. Project workers found that offering to 'value-add' to the school, to provide resources and expertise that would complement and build on existing initiatives and curriculum, was an effective way of convincing schools to participate.

I've had to be realistic and think about how I can practically fit in. I have to be seen to be someone who is an expert in a particular area and who can offer help. To deliver the resources. To do what they need.

We went to the school and talked about what could be done, how we could be a resource for them. And we took along all the policy documents, showing how we could work within their framework. That is, we could offer stuff that wasn't totally alien to the school environment.

The response to early contact was mixed. Respondents who found it relatively easy to gain access to schools attributed this to their ability to draw on existing networks with the school. The majority of projects, however, were met with more resistance than they had anticipated. This required significant adjustment to a number of project timelines and also required that the specific activities to be undertaken within the project be modified (usually meaning that they had to reduce the scope of their planned activities). Basically, project workers had to spend more time engaging the support of schools than expected and also had to demonstrate a high degree of flexibility in what they said they would

do and when they would do it. In the words of one respondent:

Tread lightly and let them catch up. They will get defensive. They're under-confident. Tread lightly and bring them along.

Accounts of meetings with schools included the following two examples:

I spoke to the entire school staff, which was difficult as everyone had their own agenda. I didn't get a bad response. Questions showing concern were raised and I was glad they were raised. I could also point to half a dozen or so people with their arms folded up the back – who knows what they were thinking.

The school, well it's been an eye-opener. In one staff meeting they actually physically turned their backs on us, played cards.

A very important learning in relation to this stage of early engagement is finding the right people to talk to and knowing how to work effectively within established school protocol. This is particularly so in cases where project workers found the school environment to be quite difficult to access. Respondents made the following comments about this process of engaging key people in the school community:

With schools its important to link in with the principal. But also to link in further down the food chain.

It's really important to go right to the top of the school for approval and support. To check that appropriate people have been approached and briefed. And never agree to a five-minute slot on the school council agenda.

A school is like any organisation. There'll be those that are for, those that are against, those in the middle and the swingers. You'll probably never have everyone on board. Get your allies.

Parent Attitudes

It was evident that one of the major reasons why schools are not always keen to act on issues of same-sex attraction is fear of negative responses from parents. This was seen as an important key factor related to school participation and project sustainability.

In the context of the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme* however, it should be noted that there was no parental backlash reported by any of the respondents, a factor which may work positively to encourage future participation of schools in similar activities. As one respondent described it:

> Principals have any number of issues. They're possibly ignorant of the issues that same-sex attracted young people are facing and how it affects young people and families. They will probably be anticipating parent opposition, the anticipation being usually much greater than it actually is. There simply hasn't been a massive parent revolt.

Respondents felt that taking an active approach and working to ensure parental support for work in this area, particularly through the school council, was one way to short circuit this fear of conflict.

A Regional Approach

One other key issue is the importance of reaching a critical mass with the schools in the area. A school may well be hesitant to participate on its own as this may cause it to be labelled as a 'problem school'. This was the case in one example where a school would not participate in the project on its own but, following an agreement to participate from two other schools in the region, the first school overcame its hesitancy. The funding implications of this are significant as the expansion of the project in this way required funding from additional sources. In one other example, a similar situation existed, with a third school vying for inclusion.

> It's sort of like if you lock two schools in you'll get all three. They didn't want to miss out.

Policy

It is also important to remember that schools do not operate in a vacuum and are in fact driven by a range of policy frameworks, key ones of which were discussed in the literature review. For many project workers, there were significant advantages in explicitly linking project activities to policy outcomes. As one respondent said:

> Fitting in with the DEET policy provides reassurance that schools need. Regional support gives the principal a great deal of confidence. And also someone to blame if it goes wrong.

As the above quote demonstrates, the use of policy material in framing the project implies high-level and regional departmental support. And this can help dissipate some of the concerns that schools continue to have about acting on issues affecting same-sex attracted young people. Using policies on harassment, bullying, mental health and sexual health in this way is clearly linked to earlier discussion on values and the ways in which project workers frame the intent of their interventions. However, despite the usefulness of much of the policy material, some respondents did not feel adequately supported and had difficulty in obtaining active DEET support, particularly at the local level.

> It would really have helped if DEET had given support to our project at the local level. When trouble starts in the community the school principals start washing their hands when they should be in there fighting for it. They need firm direction from above. Instead, we're the ones seen to be stirring the pot. Who supports the principal in all this? They need support too.

In sum, while there was clearly a range of emerging relationships between projects and schools, most project workers did not feel that they had got as far as they had expected to get with the time and the resources of their project. While there were exceptions to the rule, overall

schools had been more difficult to work with than anticipated.

> We hoped and wanted something that the school owned as a mental health promotion strategy. We were probably aiming a bit too high. We needed to remember how schools work generally. They will do some stuff but they say "we've been chosen by the government to do it" rather than "we want to celebrate sexual diversity". They frame it more conservatively.

All agreed however that progress had been made.

> In all reality I may not be able to run the programs I would like to run. They're just not ready to 'come out' about these issues. Staff are still quite fearful about it and they're not sure how to deal with it. But I've definitely been able to provide some kind of practical guidance I guess. And it's definitely made a difference.

WORKER WELLBEING

Key Learnings

■ Project managers and designers need to build in strategies from the outset to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their workers.

■ It is essential that clear guidelines be in place for minimising the possible personal and professional costs of involvement in interventions that address sensitive issues in isolated environments.

■ Ensure that skill development on these issues happens across the organisation – do not place all responsibility on the individual worker.

■ The establishment of ongoing networking and resourcing opportunities is important for increasing the sustainability of continuing action flowing from the initial *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme* funding.

Major issues arose during the implementation of the *Sexual Diversity* projects in relation to worker isolation, safety and support. For a number of projects, the level of difficulty experienced by those working in paid and volunteer capacities on various elements of the strategies was unanticipated. These difficulties were related to both the personal and the professional impact of working on sensitive youth sexuality issues in rural environments.

Isolation

Isolation was repeatedly identified as a major problem for workers, who were often directly addressing issues of young people and same-sex attraction for the first time in their local area.

> I think people are doing things in pockets without connecting. I feel like the Lone Ranger.

As one way of addressing the issue of isolation, VicHealth established an electronic mail list and also facilitated two additional networking and skill development days in Melbourne in November 2000 and February 2001. These efforts were very positively received. While the electronic networking system was not used as widely as it could have been (perhaps requiring a dedicated facilitator, as one project worker suggested), the networking days were regarded as extremely valuable.

> When we go to the VicHealth forums it's mind-blowing to see that there are so many groups doing stuff in this area. Before this I didn't know of a single worker or a network.

This identified need for networking was linked to the need for additional practical resources such as information brochures, posters, book reference lists and website contacts. Increasing the level of material provided and enhancing the opportunity for ongoing engagement with other people working in the area was seen to be an important way of ensuring that some of the work begun by project workers could be continued.

> The need for support for workers is ongoing. For workers who run youth support groups in this area to get together. We hear snippets of things that work, things that didn't work. We need to bring it all together somehow.

In addition to the need for strong infrastructure support and continuing collaboration across agencies working in the area, the need for support in the local work environment, both from a management level and also from colleagues with whom workers had daily contact, was seen as very important. This was emphasised as crucial in difficult and stressful times, for example when the media is responding negatively and project participants (such as schools) are getting nervous.

While most project designers or managers had not instigated a formal debriefing process for staff involved in the projects, there was definitely a need for workers to discuss issues in a supportive manner on a regular basis with co-workers or key allies in the town. One worker had accessed a counsellor provided by work. And one other respondent indicated that next time their organisation undertakes such a project it would set out more formally a set of protocols for participants, including paid and unpaid workers. This way, people could clearly establish boundaries around their level of participation including the degree to which they could be publicly associated with the project. Such a move was seen as one important way of improving the safety levels of all participants.

Another key strategy to support individual workers was recognition by respondents for the need to make working with same-sex attracted young people an issue for the whole organisation. As work in this area is often conducted by dynamic and talented workers, it is often easy for organisations to rely on the skills of the individual rather than bring the skills more firmly into the organisation. This can lead to a deficit in the organisation if the worker changes jobs. Further, it means that workers in this area can experience burnout and isolation within their own organisations.

Safety

Safety proved to be an issue requiring critical attention by project managers. There were at least three serious safety incidents experienced by individual workers on the projects. In one case, a worker's personal property was damaged and in another a threatening letter was received. The workers' families also experienced some pressure and in one particular case concern was expressed about the possible negative impact of association with the project on a family's local business.

Concerns for safety were further emphasised in relation to employment. For example, one respondent reported that they had failed to receive any applications for an advertised position. When they contacted those people who had registered an interest, they found that a major reason for non-application was concern for personal safety (including the safety of their children) and nervousness about their position in the local community when the project was complete. In another case, a project that had originally planned to employ a local project worker decided against it because they were concerned that they could not provide adequate assurances of safety or back-up support. These are very serious concerns, with significant resource and employment practice implications.

Closely allied to questions of worker safety are issues of the personal and professional impact of working on same-sex attracted issues in rural areas. For many, the issue of personal identity and sexuality is significant both for themselves and also for how they are perceived by their communities. This was a concern, in different ways, for both homosexual and heterosexual workers, as the following quotes demonstrate:

> Our local worker is out as a lesbian, but it needs to be kind of low-key. She needs to not be in people's faces about that sort of thing. She's already had enough trouble for saying "This is an issue". Not even "This is the issue I want to deal with". We've been able to support her in what she wants to do because we come in as an outside specialist organisation.

> What people perceive your sexuality to be and how it affects you matters. This can be positive, like if I'm straight showing other people who are straight that this is an issue for them too. But then, because I'm not a same-sex attracted young person, how can I do justice to it? I don't know what same-sex attracted young people go through. But I mean, no one else was doing it in the area anyway. So someone needed to. On the

negative, sometimes gay people wonder why you're working on it. I don't have any authority.

Concern was also raised about possible negative professional impacts of working on these issues.

> I think being a leader on these issues can taint the teacher or the youth worker and affect their career. It's a risk. Sometimes bringing in outside agencies can help prevent this.

Ways of minimising this possibility was to link the initiatives to broader statewide policy, including education, health and anti-discrimination policies and to ensure that high-level management support and appropriate back-up support, was strong.

Key Learnings

- A statewide media strategy needs to be consultative and take into account different levels of community readiness – one size does not fit all.

- Support and training in media risk management is really important for those workers engaged with projects at the local level.

- Having a well-targeted proactive strategy can generate positive media at the local level.

- Don't be afraid to take control of the media by getting in before negative reporting starts.

The role of the media was very significant in the generation of community response (negative and positive) to projects funded under the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme* at a local level as well as on a statewide basis. Unfortunately for a number of the projects, the VicHealth media strategy aimed at promoting the *Mental Health Promotion Plan 1999-2002* did have a number of serious negative consequences for some local interventions. Key Learnings in this section therefore relate to issues at a local level in managing the media and also at the program level in terms of broad communication strategies on same-sex attracted young people.

Indeed, a number of project respondents indicated that effectively managing negative press coverage had been one of the most difficult tasks that they had had to deal with. For many it was unexpected and project workers did not feel adequately warned or prepared to deal with the consequences. In relation to the media, one worker made the following comment: "I keep asking myself why is it so sensitive? Why is it so hard?"

And as one other respondent put it:

> We were concerned at the effect the media stuff might have on our project, that it might be negative, that it might affect schools, that they might be more hesitant. And that's exactly what happened.

In one case, following a statewide media release by VicHealth regarding the projects, a senior ministerial advisor rang one school that was intending to participate in a project for further information. This move exacerbated fears of a negative community response and the school subsequently withdrew permission for any student involvement in the project, limiting activities to voluntary professional development. Other schools in other regions also reneged on planned participation commitments as a result of the media release, leaving affected projects in very difficult circumstances. As one project worker put it:

> There's not enough critical mass in our area to be safe to do these things. VicHealth has got to be ready to work with local organisations and communities. You just don't use the same strategies in different parts of the country. And it's not just political – there are really genuine safety issues. Its not just about getting letters to the editor. Bad press can lead to active bullying or intimidating behaviours.

As the above examples illustrate, negative press can have very real implications for project implementation. However, it is also important to recognise that a negative media incident does not necessarily mean that the project will be wound back- some schools and communities were able to continue their work despite negative media. In one case, while the statewide VicHealth media release did generate one negative letter in the local press, there was no change to school participation, no negative parental response and the event did not appear to have had any negative long-term impact on the project.

Clearly, media strategies need to take into account the different levels of community readiness that are apparent in various communities across the state and respond in ways that are more consultative, drawing from locally developed expertise. To their credit, VicHealth did respond quickly to the needs of projects negatively affected by the press release and subsequent negative coverage in statewide and local presses by providing extensive media support, advice and training explicitly addressing issues of sexuality. These moves were very well received by projects.

Risk Management

As for next time, respondents were clear about what worked well and what they would do differently in terms of their own media strategies. The focus would certainly shift to 'risk management'.

> We needed a strategy in place for the media backlash when it came. It's such a controversial public issue and needed different handling to make it more digestible to the mainstream. And training so that we could manage it carefully and sensitively.

In terms of successful strategies, a number of respondents were able to point to the ways in which they were able to develop local media strategies that resulted in the publication of sensitive and positive stories. As the following quotes show, critical elements of this have included the need to be 'subtle', 'factual' and 'not too controversial'.

> We have been a lot more subtle and quieter in our approach. We thought that would be the best way to take it. We do believe it needs to be out there. It's no use pussyfooting around and shoving it under the carpet. It does need to be talked about and out there in the open.

> We tried to be slow and subtle, giving them a bit of information here and there. The facts, nothing too controversial.

> We were aiming to put homophobia on the front page of the paper without everyone freaking out. And it worked. We wanted to have the issues acknowledged and identified and to do it in a smooth enough way that we wouldn't have any nasty letters to the editor. And then keep working from there.

In summary, media stategies varied considerably between projects. A number of project workers, often on the advice of their local reference groups, decided not to pursue any media coverage at all. For some, this extended to a decision not to advertise events in the local press. For others, weighing up the media pros and cons led them to decide that media involvement was something that project managers needed to risk. The key was to be prepared in terms of a proactive media strategy and also in terms of skill development to deal with any negative effects.

Conclusion

This report documents the experiences of twelve projects established in rural Victoria as part of the VicHealth *Mental Health Promotion Plan 1999-2002* to address the needs of same-sex attracted young people.

The groundbreaking work undertaken by the twelve projects funded under the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme* was a very welcome and important first step in addressing the needs of this group of young Victorians.

The projects were diverse in geographical location, institutional setting and the strategies that they put in place to enhance the social connectedness and safety of same-sex attracted young people in their local communities.

In collaboration with key stakeholders in school and community settings, those engaged with the projects worked steadily and strategically to shift community norms around young people and sexual diversity.

For those working on the projects, the personal and professional impact of raising sensitive youth sexuality issues were significant and, in many instances, the amount of work done by individuals and the degree of resource support from agencies far exceeded the parameters of the grant that they had originally received. Such hard work on the part of local workers and agencies indicates that there is already a high level of commitment to achieving attitudinal change in rural communities on issues affecting same-sex attracted young people – a community strength that should be applauded and built on.

The collective and individual experiences of the twelve projects, documented in detail in this report, provide invaluable signposts for the implementation of future interventions in the field. The Key Learnings outlined in this report in the areas of values, community readiness, participation, implementation, school settings, worker wellbeing and media will facilitate this process.

Above all, this is a report about the need for continuing action to improve the wellbeing of young same-sex attracted people in rural communities in Victoria.

However, to continue this process of long-term environmental change, visible leadership and commitment from all levels of government and from within local communities is required.

The report demonstrates that sustainable change to improve the social connectedness and safety of same-sex attracted young people in rural communities is achievable. Indeed, in many communities, the instigation of these projects have already had a significant impact. In the words of one project worker:

> All the participants have grown and changed. It opened up a whole lot of questions for those kids. It touched on issues that really affect them. They're not going to forget. It'll be a highlight of their life for a long time. What they did didn't happen easily. It was really hard work. Our town will never be the same again.

Appendix A:
Project Descriptions

Central Gippsland Health Service Exploring the Young Rainbow

Objectives

■ To increase the awareness of sexual diversity so as to contribute to 'breaking down the barriers' in the wider community.

■ To provide a more supportive environment for young people exploring their sexual diversity.

■ To provide options for young people in accessing support, resources and information.

■ To support existing groups so that opportunities for social connectedness are enhanced.

Fundamental to the process used was the recruitment of a project worker from the GLBT community who had some personal insight into the issues as well as connections to the relevant networks.

Activities

■ The creation of a steering committee drawn from a wide range of service providers, the GLBT community and PFLAG.

■ Gathering a wide range of resources that were packaged and distributed to community groups, schools, medical, health and welfare service providers and places frequented by young people.

■ The distribution and placement in high profile areas of posters with appropriate messages.

■ Direct contact with pharmacies to encourage them to stock safe sex products.

■ Direct contact with libraries to stock both informative text books and novels that deal with GLBT issues and issues of sexuality generally.

■ A regular weekly 'drop-in' day when young people could voice their opinions and concerns and seek advice and support.

■ The creation of a website with links to various information sources

■ Several radio spots to publicise the project, newspaper advertisements and press releases

■ The development of a pamphlet, widely distributed, that lists GLBT-friendly service providers.

■ The development and distribution of a resource list that incorporates much of the above, including, for example, a list of books that can be found at the local libraries.

Outcomes

■ An increased level of involvement and participation from the target group.

■ Positive responses from organisations such as School Focused Youth Services, local medical practitioners, family counsellors and the local shire youth committee who included GLBT information on their 'Youth Card' that was distributed to over 5000 young people in the shire.

■ Created linkage between organisations such as PFLAG, Ramahyuck Aboriginal Cooperative, Gippsland Women's Health Service and others.

■ It led directly to a further successful submission for funding to develop 'best practice' protocols for health and welfare practitioners providing services to the GLBT community.

■ It raised the profile of GLBT issues within the auspice organisation and brought sexuality into consideration when developing future projects around health issues such as cardiovascular health, cancer, sexual health and substance abuse.

Evaluation

To the extent that there was direct observation of increased connections between various community organisations and the GLBT community, we are able to judge the project as being successful. There is ad hoc evidence from the increased level of inquiries received by our own organisation and Kilmany Family Care from young people from the GLBT community or who are exploring or questioning their sexuality to suggest that the project has reached the target group. The project worker has been directly approached by medical practitioners and community health workers to provide referral and other information (i.e., GPs now know where to go for information).

Brophy Youth and Family Services

The Connect Project

The *Connect* project provided services to four schools in the Corangamite and Moyne Shires with a focus on enhancing the physical and mental health of young people through individual and group work and community development. Issues relating to sexual orientation were addressed including homophobia, drug and alcohol use and depression. The project mainly targeted young people of secondary school age.

Objectives

■ Promote school connectedness in the target group by developing an environment where conflict can be resolved and peers can support and educate each other.

■ Provide a worker from outside the school environment as a more accessible service.

■ Provide the target group with a safe and reliable means of accessing information relating to sexuality and other health issues thereby reducing the likelihood of them engaging in risk-taking behaviour that is damaging to their health.

■ Link at-risk young people to appropriate services and information.

■ Develop a comprehensive and preventative approach to health promotion using a collaborative model that strengthens school and community resources and links.

■ Work with schools to identify which welfare issues are of priority to them and work collaboratively on these issues and issues relating to GLBTQI and homophobia.

Activities

Individual Work with Students and Families

■ An aim of the *Connect* Project was to provide students with the opportunity to discuss issues relating to same-sex attraction.

Group Work with Students, Families, Teachers and Community Members

■ Education is critical to the reduction of homophobia in rural communities and a key aspect of *Connect* was to provide information about GLBTQI issues to the community.

■ Peer mediation and support training is an innovative way of empowering students with the skills to resolve conflicts themselves and was a key goal of the project. It is an excellent means of providing education about various health issues to young people in a way which they will understand and at a time when they need it.

Community Development

■ Raising the profile of GLBTQI issues may make communities more amenable to change.

■ A working party comprised of professionals and service users in relation to GLBTQI issues was established to explore ways that the community can use to find solutions to homophobia.

■ In a rural community, young people need confidential and easily accessible information. The project developed an internet site where young people can access health and recreational information – as well as information relating to GLBTQI issues.

Bouverie Centre

Breaking Through – a Whole School Approach

Activities

Breaking Through aimed to forge a partnership between a rural school, families and the community to promote a greater tolerance of diversity and to challenge discrimination in the school and the community. The project established a community reference group comprising all the major players in health, welfare, education and youth sectors in the Macedon Ranges region (also including Melton as many young people in the Melton school targeted came from the Macedon Ranges region). The project, in conjunction with the Reference Group, used the *Theatre of the Oppressed*, professional training and development resources from ARCSHS, DEET, the Bouverie Centre and the Macedon Ranges community to raise awareness, develop curriculum materials and run discussion groups around issues of sexual diversity, and of discrimination generally, in a regional school community. Further funding to extend the project into five more schools in the region was sought and obtained within the twelve months of the VicHealth funding. A booklet to be used as a resource in the school was to be produced and used to focus discussion and develop further programs for challenging discrimination in the community.

Outcomes

The primary achievement was the engagement of three schools that traditionally worked discretely from each other, but shared the Macedon Ranges young people and their families. The project worker spent time engaging particularly the school councils, without whose support the project would not have been accepted into the school community. The SSAY – specific nature of the project was broadened to target discrimination and promotion of tolerance in order for the schools (and regional DEET) to agree to participate in *Breaking Through*. A secure email webpage was also developed, using the resources and students from one of the schools. Three *Theatre of the Oppressed* performances were produced and shown to groups of year 9, 10 and 11 students, staff, families and the community. The schools then followed up the performances with discussion groups involving students, parents and staff, yielding information and data about the nature of discrimination in the respective schools. Curriculum strategies and professional development activities formulated by staff in the first school were documented and introduced into the other schools. The Community Reference Group developed their own strategies for challenging homophobia in the respective agencies, and also developed criteria for promoting gay and lesbian friendly workplaces in the Macedon Ranges Shire.

Evaluation

The engaging of the schools took up most of the first six months, and without further funding being obtained the scope of the project would have been very limited. The need for the project to be 'owned' by all components of the school community became apparent. School communities are very complex and it was very important to the successful engaging of the schools that more than one school community was involved. The importance of staff training and development became obvious and a recursive process of professional development training was crucial to the sustainability of any strategies. The students clearly stated the importance of a whole school community approach being the way to create a safer, more tolerant culture/environment for same-sex attracted young people. Families were crucial to the acceptance of same-sex attracted young people in their community. Time constraints meant that the booklet had not been produced by the end of the twelve months, with much of the information still being gathered from students, staff and families. Fortunately for *Breaking Through*, this has been embedded in future funding outcomes.

Colac Community Health Service

Theatre of the Oppressed

Homophobia was an area of concern identified by school teachers, student welfare coordinators, school chaplains and youth workers in the Colac area. The project engaged *Theatre of the Oppressed* in an effort to address homophobia in schools in the light of its recent success in the Barwon Region. The target group was 16-year-olds currently attending secondary schools in Colac.

Objectives:

■ For the area of homophobia to be addressed with 16-year-old youth from three Colac Secondary Schools.

■ For same-sex attracted young people in the *Theatre of the Oppressed* cast or audience to identify counsellors available to assist them if they require it.

■ For young people who find academia difficult to have respite and to gain self-confidence and self-assurance.

■ For teachers and youth workers to understand better the issues surrounding the oppression of same-sex attracted young people.

Activities

Presenter of *Theatre of the Oppressed,* Bryan Derrick, was engaged to attend the three secondary schools in Colac to explain the process to teachers and to give them information regarding assistance for same-sex attracted young people.

Derrick also addressed Year 10 student assemblies at each of the three secondary schools to explain the *Theatre of the Oppressed* concept and to recruit six participants from each school (mixed gender) for the theatre group.

Students met for five days to discuss issues of concern to youth in Colac including homophobia in schools. The group then devised short theatrical scenes to explore the chosen issue, with a decidedly tragic ending to each of the stories

Students performed stories to peers and the local community in a similar format to how a television soap opera is edited. The audience was invited to input suggestions about how the original homophobic scene could be changed for the better.

The cast then re-enacted the scene by inviting members of the audience to take the place of the hero/victim in the story, thereby changing the response to the oppressive state that currently exists for same-sex attracted young people.

Counsellors were identified to the audience as being available at the end of the performance or at any time in the future when assistance may be needed.

Follow up work was done with young performers and the Year 10 audiences as a debriefing/evaluation exercise.

A report was given to CATFORCE (local network of people working with young people) by Derrick. As a follow up, health professionals were able to discuss issues of concern relating to same-sex attracted young people in rural areas such as accommodation and support groups.

Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) and Upper Murray Centre Against Sexual Assault (UMCASA)

Mansfield Community Diversity Project

Background

WHGNE and UMCASA facilitated the *Community Diversity Project* with the Mansfield community. Mansfield has a population of 2100 and an extended regional population of approximately 6000. It is, in many respects, an isolated community, with most services for young people offered on an outreach or part-time basis from provincial towns.

Approach

The project was based on the principles of community development. The project proposal was presented to the Mansfield Youth Providers Planning Group which brings together youth agencies for local area planning. There was positive response to the project and the broad project objectives fitted with the planning goals of this group. The project provided funds for a community that had previously identified issues for rural same-sex attracted young people as a key concern through research by the local Regional Youth Committee.

A Project Management Team was established with local community representatives and interested agencies, including The Bridge (a youth service agency), Delatite Shire, North East Regional Youth Committee, Office For Youth DEET. The group established terms of reference, worked collaboratively on both project management and implementation, and was committed to advocating on behalf of the project.

Focus

Issues related to sexual diversity were viewed within a broader framework of acknowledging and affirming diversity of all kinds in the community. The key focus was to work in partnership with the local community to support and strengthen the network of services available to same-sex attracted youth through training, service system development and capacity building.

The project activities included two professional training days for workers, an information session for teachers at Mansfield Secondary College and a Youth Hypothetical, 'Dare To Be Different' performed as part of the Youth Film Festival. The Film Festival was a program of shorts and features run over two evenings with a range of themes covering issues for young people, sexual diversity and rural life.

Outcomes

The evaluation indicated that developing community ownership of the project was important for community acceptance and relevance, and for implementing sustainable outcomes. The project increased knowledge and skills of workers, raised community awareness and founded an ongoing commitment to the issues. There is a growing impetus in the youth field across north-east Victoria to respond to issues for same-sex attracted youth. However, there is an immediate need to bring together workers to establish agreed standards of practice and provide additional support and training. The North East Regional Youth Committee is committed to coordinating this process.

The Project Management Team presented the project findings to the annual Youth Services Providers Forum. The recommendations accepted by the forum include: to incorporate into the existing Mansfield Youth Services planning framework explicitly stated principles of equity, diversity and inclusiveness and to incorporate the issue of diversity into the strategies of the Mansfield Youth Services Planning Group. In the coming year, the Group has decided to continue to support the youth arts festival and incorporate diversity both in the planning framework and thematically.

Gippsland Gay and Lesbian Network (GGLN)

Gippsland Sexual Diversity Youth Outreach Project

Background

The Gippsland Gay and Lesbian Network has been an active gay support group for over ten years and offers peer support and social interaction to members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community. The *Gippsland Sexual Diversity Youth Outreach Project* has enabled GGLN to begin a process of bringing together younger members so they can have input in the project design initiatives and assist in the development of strategies aimed towards preventing youth suicide.

Objectives

In the *Sexual Diversity Youth Outreach Project*, GGLN proposed to raise its profile in Gippsland to demonstrate to the sexually diverse youth that there are avenues they can follow during the coming out process. GGLN hope that by developing an information brochure, posters and an internet webpage, and hosting an official media launch, they can assist in ending the isolation of these young people and allow greater access to community services. GGLN looked forward to the opportunity of developing a process to get vital information to people in need.

Activities

A brochure was developed that details current support and social service networks offered through GGLN and acts as a reference guide to specific support services offered by agencies, locally and in the metropolitan areas.

A poster depicting gender neutrality was also developed and appeared on the brochure. This combined brochure/poster is directed at youth aged 15-25 as part of the target group defined in the *Sexual Diversity Grants Scheme* document.

In addition, an innovative webpage was designed using a combination of audio/video features and includes information on GGLN and provides links to other social groups and support organisations.

In developing these resources, GGLN sponsored the training of youth interested in developing the website and employed the help of expert webpage designers. The brochures and posters were designed to be simple but effective, portraying a positive image of sexual diversity to the general public. GGLN drew on design ideas and experience gained by similar projects internationally, and the research involved and contacts made during this phase of the program also enabled GGLN to expand the online website resource information.

The launch of the project encompassed presentations from key organisations such as the Alternative Lifestyle Organisation (ALSO Foundation), Victorian AIDS Council (VAC), Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays – Melbourne (P-FLAG), and other agencies. The target audience was politicians, school educators, community service providers, health professionals, and the community at large. Media were invited to provide coverage of the launch to raise awareness of the youth at risk issue.

Centre for Adolescent Health/Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society

Supportive School Environments Project

The *Supportive School Environments Project* was a collaboration between the Centre for Adolescent Health and the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS). The project brought together the significant work conducted by the Centre for Adolescent Health via the Gatehouse Project with the resource *Talking Sexual Health* which provides schools and teachers with teaching and learning resources and professional development materials on issues pertinent to sexuality.

Objectives

The goal of the *Supportive School Environments Project* was to develop a school environment that supports the emotional wellbeing of students, most specifically young people who are same-sex attracted or those who are perceived be. The Project worked with Year 8 students in two rural secondary schools (Traralgon Secondary College and Mirboo North Secondary College). The objectives of the project were to:

■ Develop a range of whole school strategies to develop a safe, supportive and positive school environment for all members of the school community.

■ Develop teaching and learning programs that affirm and celebrate sexual diversity.

■ Design and deliver professional development programs for student welfare coordinators, Student Support Services officers, the School Focussed Youth Service and other relevant community agencies and services to enhance their skills and knowledge in relation to same-sex attracted young people and the ways in which they can be supported if they encounter bullying and discrimination.

Activities

Whole School Strategies

■ Audited school policies, programs and procedures that support or impede the development of security, social connectedness and positive regard.

■ Surveyed all Year 8 students. Survey data was entered and analysed by the Research Unit at the Centre for Adolescent Health and then fed back to schools.

Curriculum Intervention

■ The audit of school policies, along with a substantial body of national and international research, informed curriculum interventions.

■ A specific module exploring relationships and diversity was offered to Year 8 students as part of Health Education.

■ The teaching and learning program was evaluated through selected key informant interviews with teachers and a number of small focus groups with students.

Professional Development

Professional development included training on:

■ The rationale and objectives of the *Supportive School Environments Project,* including information on the role of schools, the role of the school health team, survey administration and feeding back data.

■ Developing strategies to build a school environment that supports the security and wellbeing of young people, including those who are same-sex attracted or perceived to be.

■ Teaching for and about sexual diversity.

■ Supporting young people who are same-sex attracted who encounter discrimination or bullying.

City of Greater Geelong Youth Services and Deakin University

Pride and Prejudice – Evaluation, Packaging and Teacher Training

Background

The *GASP!* project – run through the City of Greater Geelong Youth Services from 1996 to 2000 – was primarily aimed at supporting same-sex attracted young people within the Geelong region. The project also trained local youth workers, teachers and students. As part of this project, the *Pride and Prejudice* program was developed. It aims to explore the notions of sexuality and homophobia with students in a secondary school context. It explores students' understanding of social difference, its origins and our reactions to it. It offers participants a framework with which to explore social differences, before moving through the issues of gender, masculinity/femininity, homophobia, sexuality, homosexuality and an integration of these concepts.

Objectives

Run presently using an 'outside' facilitator, the program is interactive, engaging and challenging, giving students an avenue to discuss a range of socially sensitive issues and topics. The overall aims of the program are to:

- Explore students' understanding of social difference, its origins and our reaction to it.

- Recognise how difference relates to prejudice and discrimination.

- Challenge students' thoughts on gender.

- Challenge students' thoughts on sexuality, especially homosexuality, with accurate information and examples of real gays and lesbians.

- Offer students an opportunity to address homophobia in their class and school.

Activities

Prior to the program commencing, staff are given opportunities (on a voluntary basis) to work within a working group. This involves professional development around issues of sexuality and homophobia. Staff are taken through the program before deciding on the mechanisms required to implement the program in their school (such as which students or student group will take part).

Following the level of interest in the program from both educators and the youth sector, the program has now been expanded. Extending upon the pilot programs within three secondary schools in the Geelong region – two co-educational and one Catholic – the School of Psychology, Deakin University, formally evaluated the *Pride and Prejudice* program being delivered in two secondary schools in the Geelong region utilising School Focussed Youth Service funding. The impact of the program on students' levels of self-awareness and self-image, homophobia, racism and social connectedness within the school community was evaluated. Results show that students' attitudes towards gay men and lesbians were more positive after having participated in the program – particularly attitudes of male students.

Outcomes

This evaluation process assisted in the development and formalisation of the program such that it can be utilised on a wider scale. This included development of a video resource and a formalised training manual and teacher resource kit. The outcome for the project is to have a formally evaluated educational package that is relevant, appropriate and adaptable to secondary school settings. To complement the educational package, staff from two identified rural secondary schools will be trained to implement the program within their school. Evaluation will then ascertain any differences in the program's impact on students in the Geelong trial and rural trials, utilising local teachers/youth workers to run the program.

Swan Hill District Hospital

Affirming Diversity

Objectives

- To encourage 50% of schools in Swan Hill and District to utilise the Health Promoting Schools framework to develop an 'Affirming Diversity' policy by July 2001.

- To educate 30 health/welfare professionals in Swan Hill and District on the issues facing rural same-sex attracted young people by December 2000.

- To provide an opportunity for parents and friends of same-sex attracted young people to feel supported and connected to local community services on an ongoing basis.

- To provide a supportive environment for young rural individuals that have disclosed their sexual identity.

Activities

- Sexual Diversity Advisory Committee was established.

- Sexual Diversity posters and resources were distributed to every school in Swan Hill and District.

- Conducted a number of workshops for teachers, health professionals, people working with youth and other interested parties.

- Two media releases in our local paper about our project.

- Conducted an information evening for parents and friends of same-sex attracted youth.

- Assisted school welfare teachers in providing information and support to students.

- Established our organisation as a service that same-sex attracted people, their friends and families, health professionals and others can access for information, advice and support. This is the first organisation in Swan Hill and District to actively promote services in this way.

- Established a library of resources for same-sex attracted people, families and friends, health professionals and other interested parties.

- Currently in the planning stages of establishing a group for same-sex attracted youth.

Evaluation

Objective 1 – Schools were still at the stage of needing basic information and education around the issue of same-sex attraction. Small steps need to be taken when working with schools. Even something as small as getting a poster displayed in a school staffroom can be a big step.

Objective 2 – In total, approximately 50 health/welfare professionals received education and information about issues affecting rural same-sex attracted young people. Generally professionals are interested in learning about and discussing the issues facing rural same-sex attracted people, they are just not often given the opportunity to do so.

Objective 3 – Firstly, we conducted an information and support evening for parents and friends of same-sex attracted young people. We have also established our service as one that people can access for information and support regarding sexuality issues. People, particularly parents and health professionals, continue to access our service for information and support. There are many issues of confidentiality and anonymity, and this creates barriers for parents accessing services.

Objective 4 – Planning is still underway for a group for same-sex attracted youth, and a small committee has been established to work on this project. Currently, resources and support are available for youth at our service, and they also have available to them a computer with internet access. Safety is a major concern in rural areas for same-sex attracted people.

Family Planning Victoria and Cutting Edge Youth Services

SSAY SOMETHING

Background

SSAY SOMETHING is a partnership between Family Planning Victoria (a statewide and specialist agency in the provision of sexuality and sexual health services) and Cutting Edge Youth Services (a key youth service in the Hume Region and provider of school-focussed youth services to the Shepparton schools cluster) with Berry Street Victoria (a major provider of child and family support services, fostercare and other forms of out-of-home care across Victoria, including in the Hume Region).

Activities

The Project has several components:

■ The development of a reference group of key local agencies and individuals to oversee the project and its outcomes.

■ A comprehensive training program delivered to staff and caregivers at Berry Street and staff at Cutting Edge Youth Services. Training explored practical outcomes that can be delivered at the agency level to increase the mental health support available to same-sex attracted young people.

■ A support program for same-sex attracted young people was developed and is being delivered. The program includes an orientation to services available in the local community, as well as statewide and Melbourne-based services, and is being facilitated with a view to its ongoing sustainability.

■ All staff at a local secondary school participated in a briefing session focussing on the recognition of the mental health needs of same-sex attracted young people in curriculum, policy and welfare. The Health and PE staff were involved in a full day of training aimed at developing an inclusive health education curriculum.

■ A support program for parents of same-sex attracted young people. This group can continue to operate beyond the project as a peer facilitated program.

■ The Project and its activities are being documented in a detailed report, enabling services in other regions to replicate some or all of the programs developed.

Moreland Community Health Service

Y-GLAM Theatre Project

Rural Tour

Background

Y-GLAM Performing Arts Project, a program of the Moreland Community Health Service, worked in partnership with the Ballarat Community Health Service and Austin Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service to deliver a community arts and education program in two regions of Victoria, Ballarat and Kinglake. The project aimed to raise community awareness about the issues that face same-sex attracted young people and increase the level of appropriate service provision and support for this target group.

Activities

Project Steering Committees were established in both regions, with representatives from local key stakeholders to ensure that the project was appropriate and responsive to the local communities. Y-GLAM, a community arts project for same-sex attracted young people, devised a theatre work, *Which Way Out*, exploring the issues of coming out in a country town. This was performed twice in each region followed by panel discussions. Alongside this, STEP training, forums and presentations were run for local organisations and schools.

Outcomes

The project provided a forum for local workers and teachers to gain information and a deeper understanding of the issues faced by SSAY. The involvement of young people in devising and performing *Which Way Out* and the delivery of training brought power and truth to the issues. The project was also successful in putting SSAY on the agenda for local organisations and schools and, by involving workers at every level, the project belonged to them. As a result, both regions have now established ongoing working groups, linked to the Regional Youth Committees, to continue to address the issues faced by SSAY. In addition, the local government youth services in both regions have established ongoing SSAY support groups.

ALSO Foundation

The Outward Project

Background

The ALSO (Alternative Lifestyle Organisation) Foundation was formed in 1980 to make philanthropic grants to the community, address the health, welfare and social needs of the community, and promote community development projects. The *Outward Project* was targeted at GLBT youth who are living in rural communities throughout Victoria.

Activities

The *Outward Project* aimed to improve the quality of life of rural GLBT youth through the implementation of the broad-ranging recommendations made in The ALSO Foundation's *Rural Outreach Project Report 1999*. In total, there were seventeen recommendations made in the report that formed the starting point for the project's activities after being developed with a specialised youth focus. These activities focussed on capacity building, knowledge generation and structural changes on issues that affect sexually diverse youth in rural areas. The project included local government lobbying, police lobbying, the development of appropriate resource material and the facilitation of a sexual diversity network. It considered ways of strengthening rural GLBT youth by assisting them to build networks and participate in functions that support safe, healthy and affirming environments. This was done through:

■ The development of press distribution systems for generalist/youth access.

■ Providing media coverage of rural GLBT events relevant to youth.

■ Providing GLBT youth material for publication/broadcast.

■ Lobbying government for youth information and referral services.

■ Facilitating youth group creation in the south-west.

■ Working with service organisations (e.g. VAC) for rural GLBT youth education projects.

■ Assisting with the organisation of rural youth groups.

Outcomes

The establishment of the Victorian Rural Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Network was a very significant outcome of the project. This is a statewide group of rural GLBT people throughout Victoria. Membership of the Network grew rapidly over the funding period and these members meet quarterly at large-scale meetings and social functions that are open to the public. At these meetings, updates on resources and initiatives from each rural region are shared. This provides for essential exchanges of information whilst simultaneously linking people together. The Network allows people to meet in a relaxed social and safe environment and also works to raise funds for the host region.

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