



# Arrangements for the Postal Survey

## Submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee

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**January 2018**



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## Introduction

ReachOut Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee (“the Committee”) inquiry into arrangements for the postal survey.

Under direction of the government, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) conducted a non-compulsory survey between 12 September and 7 November 2017. A survey form, instructions, and a reply-paid envelope were mailed out by the ABS to every registered person on the federal electoral roll, asking the question “Should the law be changed to allow same-sex couples to marry?”.

In 2016 and 2017 a number of health and mental health organisations issued warnings of the potential for harm and distress to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) community from a plebiscite or postal survey. This community was at higher risk of negative mental health impacts due to their experiences of discrimination, including verbal and physical abuse, bullying and social exclusion.

As a frontline youth service, ReachOut saw firsthand the pressure the same-sex marriage postal survey placed on the LGBTQI community in Australia, particularly on its younger members. ReachOut saw young people seeking help nearly 10,000 times from ReachOut.com’s LGBTQI support services over the three months from the announcement of the postal survey – a 40% increase.

During the postal survey, ReachOut joined with the Black Dog Institute, headspace, Brain and Mind Centre at University of Sydney and Orygen, the National Centre for Excellence in Youth Mental Health to launch #mindthefacts to ask Australians to consider the real and devastating link between discrimination and negative mental health impacts for young LGBTQI people when voting in the same-sex marriage postal survey. Participation in the #mindthefacts campaign resulted in ReachOut becoming the focus of abuse and trolling online from those supporting a ‘no’ vote in the postal survey.

## Terms of Reference

On 14 August 2017, the following matter was referred to the Finance and Public Administration References Committee for inquiry and report:

Arrangements relating to the collection of statistical information on the views of all Australians on the electoral roll on whether or not the law should be changed to allow same-sex couples to marry, as announced by the Government (the postal survey) with particular reference to:

- a. what information will be collected and how it will be collected, aggregated and reported;
- b. what departments and agencies will be involved and what resources will be provided;
- c. the legislative basis for the collection and how matters such as advertising, fraud, access to the roll and privacy will be regulated;
- d. the integrity of the roll and the potential for disenfranchisement of voters;
- e. protections against offensive, misleading or intimidating material or behaviour, especially towards affected communities;
- f. how issues incurred during the collection will be addressed;
- g. whether the information will be stored and what controls on future access will apply;
- h. all aspects of the conduct of the collection and related matters; and
- i. proposals for use of the information obtained, including to inform future legislation.

ReachOut's submission responds to item (e) of the inquiry's Terms of Reference.

## About ReachOut

ReachOut is a frontline youth service providing immediate help and support for free anytime and anywhere. Since its inception in 1997, ReachOut has co-designed programs and products with young people, ensuring that the evidence-based digital tools, information and support a young person accesses on ReachOut are relevant and delivered in a way that makes sense to them.

ReachOut is accessed by more than 1.58 million people each year - that's around 132,000 people every month, and 4,330 people every day.

ReachOut is designed with young people, evidence-based, anonymous and provides the opportunity connect via online forums. It gives young people the control they seek to manage on their own.

Our core service is ReachOut.com. In addition we have developed a range of innovative tools and programs that extend our reach and impact, including:

- **ReachOut Next Step:** a tool that recommends customised support options based on a young person's symptoms and how significantly the symptoms are affecting them. Support options include articles, apps, forums, and online, face-to-face or phone counselling. Referral issues include mental health, alcohol, drugs, bullying, and much more.
- **Toolbox:** a digital tool that recommends mental health and wellbeing apps and digital resources that have been endorsed by both professionals and young people. It includes three apps that have been developed by ReachOut: Recharge (managing sleep), WorryTime (managing worry/anxiety) and Breathe (managing stress and anxiety).
- **ReachOut Orb:** an innovative digital game designed for use in Year 9 and 10 classrooms that has been mapped to the Australian Health and Physical Education curriculum, as well as to the NSW Curriculum. ReachOut Orb aims to improve students' understanding of key factors and skills that contribute to improved mental fitness and wellbeing.
- **ReachOut Schools:** offers support to teachers and other education professionals on building young people's wellbeing and resilience.
- **ReachOut Parents:** provides information, tools and resources to help parents and carers support 12 - 18 year-olds in their family environment; and includes an added option of coaching to give parents concerned about their relationship with their teenager additional one-on-one online support.

## Voices of concern

Before, during and after the same-sex marriage postal survey, warnings were issued of the potential for harm and distress to the LGBTIQI community as a result of the process. These concerns were aired previously around calls in 2016 for a plebiscite on same-sex marriage. At that time the government considered extra funding for mental health groups if a plebiscite on same-sex marriage proceeded, and acknowledging the potential harm to LGBTIQI people's mental wellbeing<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> 7 October 2016, Sydney Morning Herald, accessed online at <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/samesex-marriage-george-brandis-flags-exemptions-for-civil-celebrants-extra-funds-for-mental-health-20161006-grwqv.html>

Set out below is a table which summarises a number of the statements issued.

Date	Organisation	Description
20-05-2017	Australian Medical Association (AMA) <sup>2</sup>	The AMA called on the Australian Parliament to specifically legislate for marriage equality, and to end the divisive public debate over same-sex marriage. AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon said “There are ongoing, damaging effects of having a prolonged, divisive, public debate, and the AMA urges the Australian Parliament to legislate for marriage equality to resolve this... It is often forgotten that, at the core of this debate, are real people and families. It’s time to put an end to this protracted, damaging debate so that they can get on with their lives.”
11-09-2017	National Mental Health Commission (NMHC) <sup>3</sup>	The NMHC expressed concerns about the detrimental mental health impacts of the marriage equality debate. The Commission’s Co-Chair, Professor Allan Fels said “The Commission is alarmed about the potential negative health impacts these debates are having on individuals, couples and families who face scrutiny and judgement.” The Commission’s Co-Chair Lucy Brogden said opponents to same-sex marriage were spreading intimidating and misleading material The mistruths being expressed around marriage equality are making some people feel anxious and depressed.”
23-10-2017	Medical Journal of Australia <sup>4</sup>	13 Senior paediatricians and adolescent health experts criticised the "devaluing and discriminatory" messages being disseminated by some elements of the 'no' campaign, who argue that legalising same-sex marriage puts the children of same-sex couples at risk. The paper condemned the harm done by the postal survey process, stating “The entire LGBTQ+ community is at risk of harm in the

<sup>2</sup> 20 May 2017, Australian Medical Association, accessed online at <https://ama.com.au/media/ama-calls-marriage-equality>

<sup>3</sup> 11 September 2017, National Mental Health Commission, accessed online at <http://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/media-centre/news/marriage-equality-debate-national-mental-health-commission-concerns.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> 23 October 2017, Medical Journal of Australia, Volume 2017, Issue 9 accessed online at [https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2017/207/9/kids-are-ok-it-discrimination-not-same-sex-parents-harms-children?utm\\_source=carousel&utm\\_medium=web&utm\\_campaign=homepage](https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2017/207/9/kids-are-ok-it-discrimination-not-same-sex-parents-harms-children?utm_source=carousel&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=homepage)

		current debate concerning same-sex marriage, and the most vulnerable are children and adolescents.”
26-10-2017	Australian Medical Association (NSW) <sup>5</sup>	AMA (NSW) President, Prof Brad Frankum said “We have a monumental opportunity to reject discrimination and promote equality for all Australians...By supporting marriage equality, we reduce stigmatisation. And by reducing stigmatisation, we can improve overall health outcomes among LGBTIQI populations.”
4-12-2017	The Australia Institute and the National LGBTI Health Alliance <sup>6</sup>	A survey of more than 9,5000 LGBTIQI people and their friends and family, which investigated stress as a result of exposure to negative messages about LGBTIQI people and same-sex marriage. The majority of respondents indicated they experienced negative messages about LGBTIQI+ people or same-sex marriage at least daily during the postal survey, especially online and television media.

Further in October 2016, researchers at the University of Queensland, Victoria University and with a researcher in Ireland released the report ‘Swimming with Sharks: the negative social and psychological impacts of Ireland’s marriage equality referendum ‘no’ campaign’<sup>7</sup>. The report detailed the outcomes of an online survey conducted in Ireland with a sample of LGBTI participants and their families. It found that the negative impacts of the referendum existed and remain 18 months on and despite the positive outcome for marriage equality in Ireland. It also indicated that widespread psychological and social detriment results from holding a nation-wide debate on families and children, and on whether all families and children should be treated the same in marriage law. It also indicated that the children of LGBTI parents and LGBT young people were particularly negatively impacted.

## #mindthefacts

#mindthefacts was a national campaign launched in September 2017 by five of Australia’s leading youth mental health organisations: Black Dog Institute, headspace, ReachOut, Brain and Mind Centre at the University of Sydney and Orygen, the National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health.

<sup>5</sup> 26-10-2017, Australian Medical Association NSW, accessed online at <https://www.amansw.com.au/ama-nsw-president-there-is-still-time-to-say-yes-to-marriage-equality/>

<sup>6</sup> The Australian Institute and National LGBTI Health Alliance, accessed online at [http://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/P447%20Briefing%20note\\_LGBTIQ%2B%20coping%20survey%20preliminary%20results.pdf](http://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/P447%20Briefing%20note_LGBTIQ%2B%20coping%20survey%20preliminary%20results.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Dane, S., Short, L., Healy, G., Swimming with Sharks: The negative social and psychological impacts of the Ireland marriage equality referendum ‘no’ campaign, accessed online at <https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:408120>

The campaign asked Australians to consider the real and devastating link between discrimination and negative mental health impacts for young LGBTQI people when voting in the marriage equality postal survey. The campaign followed urgent high-level talks between the mental health groups after an increase in demand for mental health services as a direct result of the same sex marriage postal survey.

#mindthefacts used real facts and evidence to urge Australians to cast a 'yes' vote, drawing attention to the peer reviewed studies confirming the negative health impacts caused by discrimination against LGBTQI people.

Notably, the campaign used evidence that as many as 3000 youth suicide attempts could be averted each year with a 'YES' vote for marriage equality<sup>8</sup>.

ReachOut also released research showing more than 40% of young LGBTQI people seeking help are at high risk of suicide – almost double the rate for their heterosexual peers.<sup>9</sup>

ReachOut's public position as part of #mindthefacts led to online abuse and trolling which required 24 hour monitoring at various stages of the campaign. Many posts appeared coordinated, and from users outside Australia. These comments were often copied and posted repeatedly across social media channels. Due to their content and the potential to cause harm and distress to ReachOut users, the majority of these posts were hidden or deleted. Screenshots of these comments are not provided in this submission due to privacy risks.

## ReachOut service usage

ReachOut saw young people seeking help nearly 10,000 times from ReachOut.com's LGBTQI support services over the course of the postal survey. Specifically, ReachOut's LGBTQI support services were uniquely accessed 9,968 times in the three months between August 2017 and October 2017, compared to 7,193 times the three months prior – a 40 per cent increase.

ReachOut had to divert resources from other critical areas to respond and support people during this period.

To add additional context below are a sample of comments from young people posted on ReachOut's peer-to-peer forums<sup>10</sup> and detailing experiences on both sides, throughout the postal survey.

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<sup>8</sup> In the United States, implementation of same-sex marriage policies has been associated with a 7% relative reduction in the proportion of *high school students attempting suicide*. The association was strongest among sexual minority students. Based on figures from the *Second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing* this would equate to almost 3,000 fewer suicide attempts made by Australian secondary school students per year.

<sup>9</sup> 29 September 2017, ReachOut, accessed online at <https://about.au.reachout.com/mindthefacts-new-research-confirms-lgbtqi-young-people-at-higher-risk/>

<sup>10</sup> As at December 2017, there were 7,152 members of the ReachOut Forums. Included in this submission are de-identified extracts from conversations during and after the postal survey period.

Month	Theme	Comment
August 2017	"Transgender" conversation	When I got my postal vote envelope I just wanted to rip it up because it's so not fair that the country is having an opinion poll on whether we're human enough for civil rights.
August 2017	"Plebiscite feels" conversation	I'm sick of the personal attacks and all the shit people say because of my gender and my sexuality and the want of my right to marry one day. It actually hurts.
August 2017	"Legalising gay marriage" conversation	It's incredibly unfair to me that people who are not gay are the ones doing the deciding with regards to legislation etc.
August 2017	"Legalising gay marriage" conversation	Personally I'm sick of the fact that it's still being discussed (as are most of the other young people I talk to). I honestly can't see why we need to have such a huge debate over whether love deserves to be recognised.
August 2017	"Struggling with the marriage debate" conversation	It sucks because my mental health was alright before the postal vote but it's spiralled out of control now.
September 2017	"Struggling with the marriage debate" conversation	To me it seems like only one opinion matters and that is a yes opinion and if you think otherwise well you might as well just gtf out of Australia.
September 2017	"Dealing with homophobia" conversation	In terms of coping with homophobia, I try to remind myself that although there are going to be homophobes out there, there are a lot of people fighting for LGBTQI rights!
September 2017	"Coping with same sex marriage debate" conversation	The thing hurting me is that in every area of my life at the moment, I feel defined by my sexuality. I feel like I'm almost branded, like a cow would be and seen as nothing other than something so personal as my sexual orientation. I came out as gay last year, and now I wish I never had.
September 2017	"Chat about marriage equality" conversation	I think it's very intense and upsetting to have other people decide something so important as to whether or not you can marry someone you love. 11% of the population (roughly) identify as LGBTQI+ and yet 100% of the population get to decide, whether they understand or are affected in any way. I find that upsetting and unfair.
September 2017	"Support during the marriage equality debate" conversation	Hi I am Gay and I am in a relationship with my girlfriend and we are very tight and very close and we're both scared for this whole gay marriage situation.
September 2017	"Dealing with homophobia" conversation	So I just spent a bit of time falling down the rabbit hole of homophobic comments on YouTube videos. I don't normally do that and instead try to surround myself with positive awesome people (oh hey there

		RO) but sometimes I do see homo/bi/trans/+phobia (not just online, a lot at school too, and other places) and it makes me really upset and annoyed and frustrated and angry.
October 2017	“My life of heartbreak and homophobia” conversation	But on that night I just could get it out. I couldn't say anything. I kept thinking what would happen if they all knew? what would happen if this got out of our friend group and to my parents? To my homophobic classmates? I want to be ready, I want to be ready to face the repercussions but I can't.
October 2017	“My dad is voting no but I haven't told him about me yet” conversation	I keep wondering what would happen if the rest of the school knew. I know I shouldn't care what others think. I just need someone to tell me that nothing will change after it comes out but I know that's not true. Some people say it's like a weight lifted of their shoulder other say it's like putting a target on their back. Maybe I should flip a coin...
October 2017	“How are you managing self-care in the lead up to the ABS publishing marriage equality results” conversation	I'm honestly just trying not to think about it at the moment, but when it starts to get to me, I'll do my best to reach out to those around me (Friends, family) that I know support marriage equality and will provide me with the support I need. I definitely feel like those people are super important in my life as if there's a bad outcome of this vote then they will be able to prove to me that it's not everyone in Australia that feels this way.
November 2017	“Everything is wrong, I can't cope” conversation.	Don't really know how to start this off but at the moment in life, I have such a range of problems that its beginning to be too much to handle. I'm gay. I live in a religious, Christian household and this wouldn't be taken well. I feel isolated and lonely and like I can't tell anyone because they may find out and that can't happen. My dad often jokes about gay people and my mum just yesterday turned the tv off so that my younger brother wouldn't see the lesbian marriage that was happening on TV.

## Conclusion

This submission details some of the experiences of ReachOut and ReachOut users over the course of the same-sex marriage postal survey.

The postal survey resulted in an increase in demand for ReachOut services.

Comments posted in ReachOut's online peer-to-peer forums indicated the survey had a negative impact on young Australians, regardless of whether they supported same-sex marriage, and whether they identified as LGBTQI.

Health and mental health organisations warned in advance and during the postal survey of the potential for hurt and harm to the LGBTQI community, and particularly as this group was at higher risk.

These experiences provide an indication that greater consideration should have been given to ensuring adequate protections against offensive, misleading or intimidating material or behaviour. Further it would have been prudent to consider additional funding support for frontline mental health services, specifically those supporting the LGBTQI community, over this period.

Finally, experience from the referendum in Ireland is that many affected communities remain impacted 18 months since the referendum and despite the positive result. This should be taken into consideration in supporting the LGBTQI community over the coming months.