



# Safety, Diversity & Inclusion in LGBTI Groups

Findings and recommendations of the Safe Space  
Scoping Project in WA

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Chameleons Society, Freedom Centre, Gay and Lesbian Community Services Inc. (GLCS), Gay and Lesbian Singers WA, GLBTI Rights In Ageing Inc. (GRAI), Loton Park Tennis Club Inc., Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), Pride WA, Primetimers, Sapphic Trampers, 26UP, WA AIDS Council Workshops, WA Wanderers

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## GLCS & LIVING PROUD

In late 2013 Gay and Lesbian Community Services (GLCS) changed its name to 'Living Proud Incorporated.' This report refers to GLCS due to the time it was written.

Living Proud was originally the name of the LGBTI Suicide Prevention Project run by GLCS and funded by the OneLife WA Suicide Prevention Strategy from December 2011 to August 2013. The name 'Living Proud' was chosen by the project steering committee made up of representatives of the LGBTI community and groups.

The Living Proud project aimed to reduce not only suicide but also discrimination within the LGBTI community and increase community engagement through a range of initiatives. The project was well received and accessed by a broad cross section of our diverse community.

The name change to 'Living Proud Incorporated' aims to reflect the organisation's contemporary work and objectives within the LGBTI community and for LGBTI people in WA. Living Proud will be known as 'Living Proud LGBTI Community Services of WA'.

Living Proud is the oldest service of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere. 2014 marks the organisation's 40th year of service to the people of WA.

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- Many groups struggled with confronting poor behaviour of members, often waiting until it became abusive or destructive. However groups which acted proactively or quickly were generally more successful
- Groups which had access to a low cost, accessible and appropriate venues were more successful and sustainable
- Groups which used online methods for communication with members, particularly in between groups activities had a bigger membership base than those which didn't have ongoing communication with their members
- Groups which had a clear purpose tended to attract a membership with a wide age range
- There is an appetite for groups to get together, collaborate more and share resources and experiences

## The key recommendations for Western Australian LGBTI groups are to:

- Adapt to the changing needs of the LGBTI community, particularly embrace all forms of diversity, otherwise they will struggle to retain members and will eventually fail
- Examine the areas where their group is not diverse, what action the group needed to take including the group reflecting on the group's norms, values and attitudes and seek assistance and/or training in order to make necessary changes
- Strongly consider formulating safe space guidelines and ensure they are enforced consistently in order to optimise the success and sustainability of their group
- Collaborate with other LGBTI groups through sharing of stories and personal experiences of group members as well as sharing resources

## The key recommendations for GLCS are to:

- Develop specific training regarding gender diversity to assist groups in becoming aware of and sensitive to the needs of trans\* and intersex people
- Assist groups to become more inclusive through the development of a template of safe space guidelines as well as a complementary training package in order for groups to become more diverse
- Facilitate cross collaboration of groups including assisting groups to find appropriate venues, particularly those which cater for people with physical and sensory disabilities, and organise dates for events
- Facilitate discussion between groups with the purpose of encouraging greater community participation by younger members of the community

## 1. BACKGROUND TO THE LIVING PROUD PROJECT

The Living Proud Project, managed by Gay and Lesbian Community Services (Inc.) in 2012/2013, is a community capacity building initiative as part of the OneLife WA Suicide Prevention Strategy targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, intersex people and other sexuality and gender diverse people regardless of their self-identification, collectively known as the LGBTI community. It is widely accepted that the LGBTI population accounts for 10% of the population.

Research indicates that same sex attracted Australians attempt suicide at between 3.5 and 14 times the rate of their heterosexual peers<sup>2</sup>. Same sex attracted young people attempt suicide at approximately six times the rate of their heterosexual peers<sup>3</sup>. Approximately 20% of transgender Australians<sup>4</sup> and 15.7% of lesbian, gay and bisexual Australians<sup>5</sup> report current suicidal ideation. Up to 50% of transgender Australians have attempted suicide at least once in their lives (Couch et al. 2007). Although there is a lack of data on intersex people, international research and anecdotal evidence in Australia indicate that intersex adults also experience disproportionately high rates of suicidal ideation and attempts<sup>6</sup>.

Despite these already high rates, suicide mortality statistics are likely to be underestimated, as sexual orientation and gender identity are not necessarily publicly known or readily identifiable through existing data collection methods.

It is important to note that being LGBTI in itself is not a suicide risk factor; rather it is the marginalising attitudes and discrimination present in society that contribute to factors that place LGBTI individuals at a greater risk of suicide.

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<sup>2</sup> Suicide Prevention Australia 2009

<sup>3</sup> Dyson et al. 2003

<sup>4</sup> Couch et al. 2007

<sup>5</sup> Pitts et al. 2006

<sup>6</sup> Schutzmann et al. 2009 in Rosenstreich 2011

<sup>7</sup> Suicide Prevention Australia 2009; Dyson et al 2003

<sup>8</sup> Hillier et al 1998, 2005 and 2010; Pitts et al 2006; Couch et al 2007

## Risk and Protective Factors for suicide

LGBTI people in Australia experience a higher prevalence of risk factors related to suicide than their non-LGBTI counterparts<sup>7</sup>, including:

- previous suicide attempts or deliberate self-harm
- current or past mental health difficulties (notably, depressive and affective disorders)
- exposure to attempted or completed suicide by a friend or relative
- social isolation
- family and or relationship stress
- harassment, physical or sexual abuse
- discrimination; and
- substance use problems

Intersex, trans\* and gender diverse people are at highest risk within LGBTI communities, as well as young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and people who experience discrimination and abuse<sup>8</sup>.

Protective factors for LGBTI people are similar as for the general population, and include:

- good mental health and wellbeing
- good physical health
- positive sense of self
- adaptive coping skills
- positive outlook and attitude to life
- a sense of social connection

Due to the impacts of discrimination and marginalisation, some protective factors that are particularly important to LGBTI people include:

- visibility of positive LGBTI role models
- supportive social connections and family relationships
- absence of guilt and shame
- access to inclusive and affirmative support services

Funded by the OneLife WA Suicide Prevention Strategy, the main priorities of the Living Proud Project are to:

- increase LGBTI community knowledge about suicide prevention
- decrease discrimination within the LGBTI community
- improve community connection and social support within the LGBTI community

The Living Proud Project recognises LGBTI community groups as important resources where LGBTI people, who may feel isolated and alone in their experiences, can build a sense of belonging and community. As previously mentioned, the existence of established support networks acts as a strong protective factor against suicide for individuals hence optimising their health and wellbeing. Therefore it is imperative that LGBTI groups are affirming and encourage people to support and engage with each other and that behaviour which is overtly discriminatory or increases the likelihood of a person re-experiencing isolation is not tolerated within the group.

## 2. RATIONALE FOR THE SAFE SPACE SCOPING PROJECT

The metaphor of a “safe space” has emerged as a description of a climate that allows people to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. Safety in this sense does not only refer to physical safety, but rather protection from psychological or emotional harm and distress. A safe space is one in which people are able to openly express their individuality and be themselves.

Advocates for Youth in New York which have an emphasis on the rights of LGBTI people define a safe space as:

*A place where anyone can relax and be fully self-expressed, without fear of being made to feel uncomfortable, unwelcome, or unsafe on account of biological sex, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, cultural background, age, or physical or mental ability; a place where the rules guard each person's self-respect and dignity and strongly encourage everyone to respect others<sup>9</sup>.*

Perth is currently home to a number of community groups catering to LGBTI people, including social, sporting, leisure, activism and support groups. Feedback from the LGBTI community suggests that some community groups are struggling to maintain memberships and attract new members. Some have experienced difficulties finding leaders to take on the responsibilities of maintaining groups.

Furthermore, discussions at Living Proud diversity forums suggest that discrimination directed at LGBTI people is present, both in the broader community, but also from within the LGBTI community itself. This discrimination may be based on a person's sexuality and/or gender, as well as other typically marginalised identities a person may have such as being older, having a disability, being culturally and/or linguistically diverse, being gender diverse or expressing their political or spiritual views. The discrimination experienced can be overt or covert resulting in people feeling invisible or excluded from the LGBTI community, not feeling safe to talk about their experiences or not feeling safe to participate in the LGBTI community altogether.

<sup>9</sup> www.advocatesforyouth.org

<sup>10</sup> Florida R (2012) The Rise of Creative Class Revisited.

<sup>11</sup> Including age, disability, gender, gender expression, gender history, culture/language, relationship or family status, socio-economic status, sexuality, spirituality, religion, political beliefs, etc.

LGBTI people who experience stigma, discrimination or lack of inclusion from within the LGBTI community may find this more distressing than experiences of discrimination and exclusion from the non-LGBTI community. This may be due to anticipating greater acceptance from other LGBTI people.

One step towards making the LGBTI community safer is to address inclusion and belonging aspects within these groups for all LGBTI people. There is evidence that environments which are inclusive, tolerant and accepting of diversity, tend to be more vibrant, attract people to join and, as a result, become more sustainable<sup>10</sup>.

The overall objective of the Safe Space Scoping Project is to investigate how LGBTI groups can be more inclusive of the rich diversity in the LGBTI community and to develop sustainable strategies based on what has been successful to date and that suit their particular group.

### The Safe Space Scoping project aimed to ascertain:

- How inclusive of diversity<sup>11</sup> LGBTI community groups in WA currently are
- What challenges groups have experienced in addressing inclusion and what they have learnt in the process
- What changes groups consider are necessary for sustainability and how they could be implemented
- How GLCS could assist in this process

*'Groups can be cruel to their members. They pick on specific individuals to torment, ostracize, or use as scapegoats for their group's shortcomings; exiling these poor souls to the margins of the group, casting them out of the group altogether, or treating them as if they no longer exist.....'*

*...the simple act of being ignored simultaneously attacks four fundamental human needs. Our sense of connection and belonging is severed; the control we desire between our action and outcome is uncoupled; our self esteem is shaken by feelings of shame, guilt or inferiority and we feel like a ghost, observing what life would be like if we did not exist.'*

*- Kipling Williams (2001) 'The Power of Silence'*

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The Living Proud Project identified a range of formal and informal<sup>12</sup> LGBTI social and community groups via listings in QPages and OutinPerth as well as through community contacts. The aim was to access a representative sample of LGBTI community groups that meet different needs and offer social activities and engagement for members of the WA LGBTI community.

The identified community groups were sent a letter, explaining the objectives of the project and requesting their participation. The groups were then sent a follow up e-mail, to arrange a time for an interview.

The groups that participated in the project are as follows:

- Chameleons Society
- Freedom Centre
- Gay and Lesbian Community Services Inc. (GLCS)
- Gay and Lesbian Singers WA (GALSWA)
- GLBTI Rights In Ageing Inc. (GRAI)
- Loton Park Tennis Club Inc.
- Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)
- Pride WA
- Primetimers
- Sapphic Trampers
- 26UP
- WA AIDS Council Workshops
- WA Wanderers

Groups invited to participate but did not accept the invitation include:

- Asians and Friends
- Bears Perth
- Dykes on Bykes
- Freedom2B
- Golf Bags
- Lesbian Space
- OutDance
- Perth Outdoors Group
- WA Gay League

The consultant employed by the Living Proud project, contacted and arranged interviews with Presidents, Chairpersons, Coordinators and/or committee members from each of the participating community groups. Semi-structured interviews lasting from between 1 and 3 hours were conducted to elicit information on the following themes:

- Purpose of the group and its main activities
- The membership and general composition of the group
- How new members join the group and whether there were any particular methods or strategies used for this purpose
- A description of general group dynamics
- How the leadership of the group occurs as well as committee formation and succession planning
- How the group resolves conflict when it occurs
- Whether there were safe space guidelines or codes of conduct in place and if so, their impact
- Inclusivity practices
- How the group caters for the needs of the diverse community

Groups were also asked to fill in a short survey regarding their group's basic demographics. Where possible, group members (i.e. non-committee members) were also interviewed for their perspective on how the group was coordinated and how they felt as part of the group and the LGBTI community.

The consultant also spent time observing and participating in a range of community groups, experiencing the dynamics of the groups first hand. These were Freedom Centre, Chameleons Society, Gay and Lesbian Singers WA and Primetimers.

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<sup>12</sup> Formal groups are defined as those having a legal status, generally incorporated under the WA Associations Incorporation Act 1987 or auspiced by such a body. They have specified objectives and formalised rules and regulations which govern the operation of the groups including an elected leader/leadership group. Informal groups consist of a group of people working together to achieve a common goal however they generally do not have a formal set of rules or structure. There are likely to be primary group relations/friendships, group norms, ties of mutual obligation and a chosen leader. Informal groups are often present within formal groups. Having a formal governance structure and set of rules does not guarantee a successful group if the members do not have good-will to the group or each other. The most successful formal groups are those which are supported by the informal groups which have formed naturally within a formal group.



reported that they were struggling also complained of an inappropriate or unsuitable venue but that there were few low cost venue options that they could afford.

Regarding facilitating interaction within the group, committee members generally felt it was their job to organise the social space, but not to moderate interaction between members. Interestingly, when non-committee members were asked about this, they often commended the leadership group for their facilitation and moderation, which they believed contributed to a consistent safe space and attributed it as one of the main reasons they kept participating.

## 4.2 MEMBERSHIP & PARTICIPATION

As expected, community groups had a fairly standardised way of promotion (word of mouth, OutinPerth, QPages, website, Facebook page) whilst some groups occasionally had funding to promote social events in mainstream media such as the West Australian newspaper. Support groups often received referrals or new members after distributing information at other venues such as schools, doctors' waiting areas and other support services.

All groups appeared to have a consistent approach to welcoming new members into the group, generally by a committee member initially introducing themselves and then ensuring the person was socialising with others in the group. All participants cited this as vitally important to having a positive experience and part of the reason they felt comfortable in the space.

Once new members were part of the group, most groups maintained an email database and informed members of group activities with email updates. Some groups also used Facebook as a way of informing members of activities.

Several groups had an online forum where members sign up and interact online. Groups found this was an excellent way of providing a service to members who could not access their social space for a variety of reasons, including living outside of the Perth metropolitan area. From the information provided by groups, there was a positive correlation between the size of a group's online presence and the number of active members.

A group's ability to retain members after a person had participated once, as well as the number of members on their databases accessing their information, appeared to vary significantly. Some members of the LGBTI community have been active in their groups for several years to over a decade.

The key leaders and members of these groups attributed several reasons to a group's ability to maintain members for so long:

- Members were aligned with the common goals and objectives of the groups
- The committee had intentional and focused conversations on the direction of the group and how to achieve common goals and objectives
- Members felt a sense of pride for what their group has accomplished in the past, or continues to accomplish
- A strong social scene where members can interact and meet and connect with new people
- A variety of activities that appeal to everyone in the group
- A dedicated committee that puts in a lot of effort

Key leaders of the other groups that struggled to retain members attributed this to:

- Inappropriate and /or inconveniently located venue
- Natural attrition
- A view among the group that there was no longer a need for specific LGBTI community groups due to a greater degree of acceptance in contemporary society which tended to have more liberal views to LGBTI issues than in the past

However, when discussing the last point, some leaders revealed that the low membership of their group was due to other more complex issues as follows:

- The inability of their group, committee and non-committee members, to embrace changing needs and dynamics within the LGBTI population
- The group's inability to accept, embrace and manage all aspects of diversity such as different genders, age, cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs and ability
- The group's inability to create a safe space inclusive of all individuals by dealing with conflict, poor behaviour or overt or covert exclusion of some members
- The committee's lack of enthusiasm or capacity to provide a variety of inclusive, vibrant and interesting activities
- The strong personal bias of some group members which influenced or prevented the group as a whole from fully embracing or accepting new members which had a negative impact on the group and which the rest of the group felt unable to counter

More than one group cited two similar circumstances that highlight issues impacting participation:

- Where trans\* people attended, whether they were included or not often related to how they 'passed'. In some groups 'passing' too well or not well enough led to exclusion from different groups at different times
- In social support groups, where people with mental health issues requiring support felt less included as the main objective of the group was to make friends

Another issue that impacts on an individual's participation in a group or having a sense of inclusion is when there are cliques within a larger group. Whilst it's natural for friendship groups, based on shared experiences and interests to form among people within a larger group, group leaders identified that friendship cliques can be a reason why people might feel excluded.

Overall there was strong correlation between the group's ability to attract and retain members with a high level of satisfaction where a variety of activities were offered and the group, as a whole, embraced change, including the inclusion of a diversity of members.

## 4.3 INCLUSIVITY

### 4.3.1 Sex & Gender

All groups were asked if trans\* members of the community would be welcome at their group. Most community groups hesitated as they had never had any experience in the area of gender diversity, however concluded that trans\* people would be welcome. More than one key leader expressed concern that, if the majority of the group's composition were trans\*, it would change the dynamics and detract from the value that cisgender members receive from being a part of the group.

With regards to LGBTI groups with a single gendered target demographic, the general consensus was that a trans\* member who presented primarily as the gender of the target demographic would feel more included than someone who still presented as their sex assigned at birth. For example, a female-to-male trans\* individual would more likely be included by other members in a group targeted for men if they presented as a male, rather than someone who still appeared predominantly female. Particular groups felt that they wouldn't let anyone who didn't attempt to 'pass' join their group. While these attitudes are certainly problematic for including all trans\* people, particularly non-binary transgender people and trans\* people who have not medically transitioned, many groups showed willingness to learn about and include trans\* people.

When interviewing some committee members, they felt that it would be their responsibility to outline to potential new members who are trans\* what they could expect from the group and welcome them upon their first meeting and introduce them to new members. These committee members did not feel it was their responsibility to remind other members to be inclusive, and that it was up to the new member to be assertive in reminding other members to use correct pronouns and name. Only some key leaders felt they would step in if anyone were being extremely disrespectful.

Particular community groups did have a strong stance regarding gender diversity and took action to make their space gender inclusive, including changing their Constitutions and changing the language they use when promoting and talking about their group. Key leaders of these groups dealt with disrespectful behavior by confronting individuals and reminding them of the need to adhere to common goals and a code of behaviour by which all the members were expected to abide. In the event they were not able to comply, they would have to choose to opt out of future involvement. The groups with strong, inclusive stances were more likely to have trans\* members actively involved in the group.

Interestingly, certain groups without members who are trans\* expressed frustration in running a social space that had to balance the interests of both males and females. In a similar vein all male or all female groups praised and valued having a safe space in which they could share personal and intimate details with people from the same gender and, whom they believed, would understand.

Mixed gender groups stated they may have more active men than women or vice versa from time to time. In these instances, there was a belief that it was natural that conversations and interests may become skewed in one direction. As a result, some group members expressed that this often made them feel excluded, and deterred them from participating in the group at times.

No groups reported having members who identified themselves as intersex. One group leader recognised that many intersex people may not identify with the LGBTI community unless they also identified as LGBT.

### 4.3.2 Age

Groups that did not have a stated or targeted age demographic discussed how difficult they found it to cater for the entire community. In particular, more established community groups found it difficult to engage younger LGBTI people. Most groups that participated in this study estimated their average age would be over 50 and expressed the belief that the younger population were not interested in anything

other than the 'club and pub' scene. There was a general perception that the younger population looked at the older population with disdain and disinterest. Some also felt that their community group composition was self-perpetuating - because they had no young members, no young members wanted to join.

However, some community groups did demonstrate a wide age range within their group (the widest being 19 years to over 60 years). Groups that did cater to these wider age range attributed it to having a common goal on which the group focused e.g. music performances for GALSWA or tennis at Loton Park.

Despite the perception that there is a generation gap which keeps people apart because of disinterest, younger members of the community displayed an interest in learning about the experiences of coming out from senior members of the community, whilst senior members were interested in the issues and challenges that young people face today.

### 4.3.3 Race & Cultural Background

The groups that participated in the study felt they were open to all members of the LGBTI community, regardless of race or background. Some groups identified people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds who were currently members of their group.

Some key leaders said that it wasn't the group's inclusivity that would prevent anyone from different cultural backgrounds joining community groups, but whether those potential members had the ability to relate and communicate with other members of the group including dealing with possible language barriers. In other words, those from different backgrounds would be expected to fit in with existing group norms, rather than the group adjusting or modifying their behaviour in order to make an individual feel included and welcome.

Others expressed views that as some LGBTI people come from countries or cultures which instil varying levels of homophobia it may result in them being reluctant to join openly LGBTI groups. For example homosexuality is considered sinful, taboo and sometimes illegal in many African countries and some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Therefore joining a group that automatically associates a person with being LGBTI may not appeal to individuals that wish to avoid being visibly part of the LGBTI community.

One group identified that their group's ignorance of different cultural backgrounds may hinder their ability to cater for a person from that background. However, they felt that the different experiences the person would have faced would only add value to the group and not hinder it.

### 4.3.4 Spirituality

All groups were asked if they felt their group was inclusive to individuals with different spiritual belief systems. All key leaders displayed confidence that people with a spiritual belief system (including those with no spiritual beliefs) would not be excluded from joining their group at a committee level.

Groups were asked if they felt anyone would feel excluded for their belief system once they had become a member or whether it would impact negatively on the group dynamic. Most participants felt that it would not be an issue, and that most members and committees would be respectful of each other's belief systems. Most key leaders felt that someone trying to 'convert' others to their belief system would be considered inappropriate and they would be asked not to.

However one leader felt reasonably sure that anyone from a Christian background who expressed their beliefs would not feel welcome within their group, given the current group dynamics, and would face exile from certain 'stronger' personalities. However, another group leader expressed the view that diversity in any form "would only add value and richness to the conversation".

### 4.3.5 Ability

All groups were asked if they felt that members of the community with differing levels of ability would be welcome at their group. All groups confidently stated they would not discriminate against different ability levels. Some groups identified members with various disabilities currently in their group and explained how these individuals had become integral members to their group and were treated equally.

Any concern regarding ability only arose when discussing how that might impact on their ability to communicate appropriately in a social space or participate in physical activities. Some key leaders generally did not feel their group could cater for those circumstances, and it would be up to the individuals and the character of other members to help these individuals.

Groups meeting the needs of senior members of the community provided feedback that not all LGBTI groups were physically accessible. For example, not having wheelchair access, the inability to provide alternative transportation and the timing of community events often prevented some members of the community participating in these groups.

## 5. SUPPORT & COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Almost all members who participated in groups felt they had made friendships and received support and encouragement from other group members. However, it is arguable that the members who participated in the Safe Scoping Project may be biased as socially isolated members may not have heard about the project due to not regularly attending the group.

With regard to poor mental health and suicidal ideation, community groups as a whole felt ill-equipped to deal with these issues. Most groups felt that their group was not designed for this purpose, and would not want the overall tone of the group to become a mental health support network. However, key leaders identified a number of instances of members providing direct feedback to them about how the group had reduced their social isolation, assisted them to make friends, helped them through the difficult time of 'coming out' and assisted them through gender transition. This indicates the importance of groups to the social connection and sense of belonging for LGBTI people.

## 6. PRESENCE OF GUIDELINES

Many community groups have moved towards becoming incorporated associations. As a result, the majority of participating LGBTI groups had a legal constitution that formalised a governing structure with stated objectives. Despite this, a majority of the groups deemed the constitution a 'technicality' of being an incorporated body, to which they did not strictly adhere. Other groups had a clear idea or definition on what was inappropriate and appropriate behaviour although it was not necessarily codified or formalised.

Most groups did not have any further safe space guidelines or a code of conduct to assist with facilitating the group. In these instances, leaders said that they rely on the 'good character' of their members to be respectful and demonstrate socially acceptable behaviour to each other rather than enforcing formal 'safe space guidelines' or 'codes of conduct'. However key leaders provided examples and instances where group members were inconsistent

at enforcing respectful behavior and did not speak up when socially unacceptable, excluding or disrespectful behaviour occurred. Rules, even informal ones, which are inconsistently reinforced may actually lead to more problems and produce behaviours that are not favorable to achieving the groups' objectives. It can lead to a perceived hypocrisy by group members leading to a lack of respect within the group.

However a number of leaders also felt that too much moderation of the social space detracted from its value of being a place where people can express themselves freely and were therefore hesitant to enforce any further 'rules'. Interestingly, those groups were also observed to have the highest level of internal conflict, the lowest range of diversity amongst members and the lowest number of members as compared to other groups. Furthermore they self-identified their groups as being negatively perceived by the LGBTI community.

By way of contrast, groups with safe space guidelines that were enforced regularly had the highest levels of membership, low levels of internal conflict, committees that functioned as a team and the widest range of diversity amongst the group. Therefore, evidence provided by the LGBTI groups in WA suggests that not only do safe space guidelines not detract from a group, but actually enhance how well it functions and encourage its success.

It should be noted that the presence of safe space guidelines does not mean there will be an absence of inappropriate behaviour, but rather indicates that a standard exists and there are guidelines to deal with breaches. They also encourage and accept behaviour that is conducive to achieving the goals of the group and building good will amongst its members.

Groups had a variety of strategies to build good will including acknowledging and rewarding effort, thanking volunteers, celebrating birthdays and hosting end of year functions and other celebrations. Through anecdotal evidence, members felt that these strategies helped groups develop a sense of 'family' and resilience that carried them through crises including financial troubles, dramatic changes in committees or even grieving the death of a group member.

*"...not only do safe space guidelines not detract from a group, but actually enhance how well it functions and encourage its success."*

## 7. CONFLICT, CRITICISM DECISION MAKING

As previously mentioned, an overwhelming majority of the groups did not feel the need for safe space guidelines. However there were a number of instances when these same key leaders spoke of current members within their group that consistently demonstrated challenging behaviours and often offended other members. Challenging behaviours were generally identified as loud, self-centered, attention demanding and seeking and/or outwardly disrespectful to another member (in other words, not unlawful but unpleasant).

Other behaviour which can be challenging and difficult to manage but less obvious, are people with extreme shyness or social withdrawal; the presence of subgroups or cliques which result in other group members feeling excluded; people displaying overly sexualised behaviour or language; people who have a poor understanding of personal space; and disparagement of the opposite sex or trans\* people.

Some leaders reported that they generally felt lost when dealing with strong behaviours and were hesitant to step in and ask someone to seemingly 'change their personality'. In these instances, they depended on the group to acknowledge inappropriate behaviour and resolve it amongst themselves. Only when behaviour went 'beyond challenging' would committees step in. 'Beyond challenging' behaviour was any behaviour that was considered violent or threatening and / or compromised the person being allowed to attend on future occasions.

Some examples cited were people who consistently abused alcohol at social functions and became rude and abusive, anyone who wouldn't follow leader instructions when participating in physical outdoor activities where safety was a concern and people who deliberately (or inadvertently) created any negativity towards the group or committee.

In terms of resolving these issues, some key leaders felt that a one on one meeting with the particular individual causing conflict was the first step to resolving any issues. However the general consensus was that by the time the committee had got to the point of stepping in, the member had gone too far and would most likely be excluded from the group regardless of explanations.

Groups described a variety of different ways to deal with conflicts as follows:

- Committees involved the offending member in a meeting to decide the member's future involvement in the group
- Committees discussed the issue without the offending member present, made a decision and then told the member they were not welcome anymore
- Groups unceremoniously excluded that person from their database so they received no future invitations to join group activities

Some key leaders identified that not responding to conflict and resolving internal issues resulted in a variety of negative consequences. Examples of these consequences given by the participants include:

- Members feeling a lack of integrity or belonging within their group
- The conflict created a divided feeling amongst group members
- Members starting their own group due to not feeling like their opinions were being heard

Some key leaders said that once community groups got a reputation for having conflict they often underestimated the power of community perception once the group's reputation or 'brand' was tarnished. As a result they felt it was hard to attract new members and integrate into the community and community referrals were not forthcoming.

In regards to addressing conflict and criticism, some leaders suggested that this was best resolved when:

- there is an explicit understanding of the person within the groups who takes responsibility for dealing with challenging behaviour
- the issues were discussed proactively or before they got out of hand
- groups conducted informal reviews on a semi-regular basis
- committees had formal debriefs or reviews - answering the question of 'how do you think we are going?'

Of the groups that had structured safe space guidelines that were enforced, the members of those groups specifically identified the safe space and the efforts of the leaders maintaining it as adding value to the social space. They stated they felt comfortable and assured they and everyone else would be respected.

# 8. SAFETY IN GROUPS

In 1943, Abraham Maslow introduced a simple of hierarchy of needs that can be applied to dynamics of community groups. The model in *Figure 1* represents a consecutive series of needs that every individual has, claiming that in order to achieve the higher levels of self-actualisation you must first achieve the lower levels. The findings from the Safe Space Scoping Project were consistent with Maslow’s model. Members who explicitly stated they felt safe and respected also reported that they felt accepted, had made friends and felt better about themselves. Generally speaking, members who didn’t feel safe and respected were less likely to regularly participate in the group, preventing them from increasing their self-esteem and connectedness with the community.

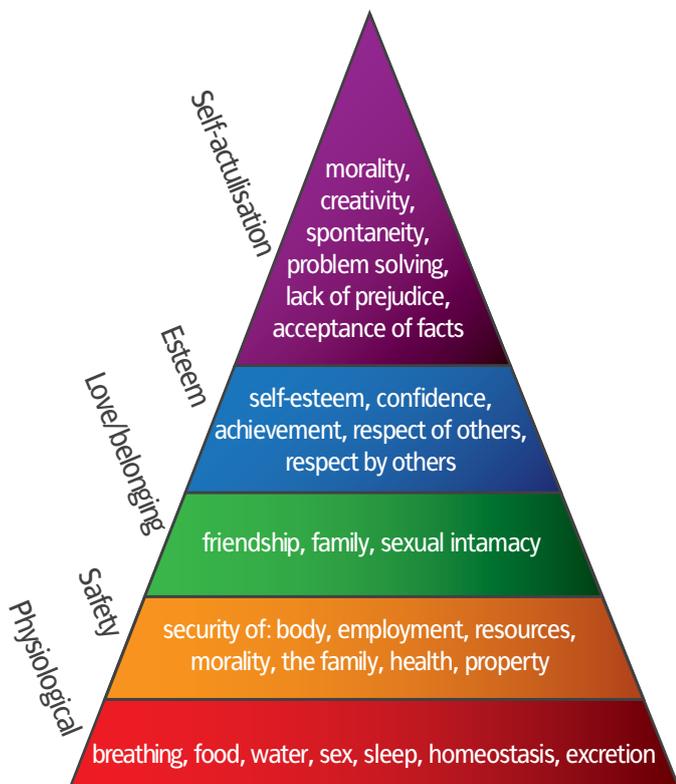


Figure 1 Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.

The ways in which groups approached safe space guidelines and how they were enforced in the space can be summarised in *Figure 2*. This diagram was constructed using only the evidence provided by participating groups and no other external source.

The X axis has been labeled with ‘Informal’ and ‘Formal’ at opposite ends. This refers to the way in which the guidelines of the group manifest. ‘Informal’ refers to those groups who do not have documented guidelines but rely on the characters of members of the group to respect individuals, whilst ‘formal’ refers to those who have constitution and other guidelines or codes of conduct in place.

<b>NO FORMAL RULES BUT SHOWED RESPECT FOR ALL MEMBERS</b>	Practised	<b>FORMAL RULES AND SHOWED RESPECT FOR ALL MEMBERS</b>
Participants sometimes felt safe, accepted, respected and supported.		Members felt safe, accepted, respected and supported.
Adequate levels of membership to sustain group.	Not practised	High levels of membership.
General satisfaction with being a part of the group.		High level of satisfaction with being part of the group.
Low levels of internal conflict.	Informal	Low levels of internal conflict
		Formal
<b>NO FORMAL RULES AND DID NOT SHOW RESPECT FOR ALL MEMBERS</b>	Not practised	<b>FORMAL RULES BUT DID NOT SHOW RESPECT FOR ALL MEMBERS</b>
Generally groups had very low membership and/or group activity due to people leaving as a result of feeling unsafe.		Hypocrisy, felt unsafe and cliquey.
Extremely low levels of membership.	Practised	Low levels of membership.
Reported dissatisfaction with being part of the group.		Not all members are satisfied with being part of the group.
High levels of internal conflict.	Not practised	Moderate levels of internal conflict

Figure 2 Group Guidelines

The Y axis was labeled with ‘Practised’ and ‘Not Practised’ at opposite ends. ‘Practised’ refers to those groups who regardless of their documentation and processes, facilitate the space well to ensure all members are respected. ‘Not practised’ refers to those groups which, again regardless of their documentation and processes, do not successfully show respect for all members of the group.

The table clearly shows that groups with codes of conduct and guidelines which are enforced are the most successful, experienced the least conflict and were the most sustainable.

## 9. CONCLUSION ON FINDINGS: WHAT WORKS WELL AND DOES NOT WORK WELL

Many community groups found that hosting activities designed to be inclusive of every group member were not only the most well attended, but members gave them the most positive feedback. Activities that had **general appeal** (e.g. food and socializing) were received more favourably than activities that potentially excluded some members because they appealed to a limited audience (e.g. book clubs, music clubs etc).

In some instances, key leaders felt that it was working towards a **common goal** (e.g. performance, competition) that developed a sense of belonging and pride within their group that meant members continued to return. The groups working towards a common goal also had the widest age range, including younger and older members of the LGBTI community.

Members were also extremely responsive to **enthusiastic, strong and decisive** leadership. Key leaders stated that the composition of the groups' committees had a critical impact upon the social space. Committees that had **clearly defined roles**, a focus on **meeting the objectives** of their group in different ways and an appropriate number of members often functioned the most efficiently. Non-committee members of these groups generally found it easy to give feedback and were confident that it would be considered and discussed at committee meetings. Committees with undefined roles or excess numbers often found it hard to make decisions, and make necessary changes to the group to meet the current needs of the community. This resulted in low membership.

Regarding **safe space guidelines**, there was a difference of views as to their value. Groups which had them and had members who facilitated the space to ensure the guidelines were upheld, had the highest number of members, the highest level of membership satisfaction and the lowest level of conflict. Members said they felt the space was conducive to helping them get what they wanted from the group. The safe space rules were also used as a point of reference to work towards tailoring challenging behaviour to fit the goals and objectives of the space which included being respectful to all members.

Community groups that felt that safe space guidelines would detract from the social environment tended to have low attendance and high levels of internal conflict. These groups also had members that expressed frustration that they felt they had to 'put up' with disrespectful behaviour until the member stopped coming. This often led to their lack of motivation to participate in the group all together.

Groups which had discussed and planned how they would deal with **poor behaviour or conflict** between group members reported having a safe environment. In the event that a group did not have a plan, groups that dealt with problems, rather than let them simmer, had greater success. It was also seen to be important for group leaders to take responsibility for managing this process rather than dealing with problems in a covert or non-transparent way such as not informing group members of activities.

**Celebrating success**, acknowledging the efforts of members, and groups with well-developed communication methods that engaged with members outside of regular meeting times, appeared to function better than those which appeared disengaged with their members. Engaged groups appeared to increase good will and meant that groups were able to proactively and openly deal with adversity such as financial issues, illness or death among group members.

There was a definite correlation between having a **consistent and suitable venue** and the number of active members. 'Suitable' was defined differently for different groups but common themes included the location, physical accessibility, appropriate resources and the anonymity. Anonymity was cited as particularly important when considering new members that may be hesitant if they have not connected with the LGBTI community previously. Most groups without a defined venue identified that having a consistent venue, which was affordable was an element that would be very helpful.

*"I think any group that helps people feel better or provide support is a great addition to any community."*

*- Living Proud evaluation survey respondent, 2013*

## 10. IMPLICATIONS, STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 10.1 IMPLICATIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR GROUPS

Group members definitely recognised and respected leaders and committees that worked well together with the common goal of meeting the group's objectives. Groups reported higher levels of efficiency, found it easier to discuss challenges and make decisions when key leaders had job descriptions and committee members were given clear expectations.

#### Strategy 1.

*Have a discussion at a committee level about individual roles and responsibilities and ensure that they are clearly defined. Evaluate the strengths of committee members, making adjustments where necessary to ensure that the committee continues to function at an optimal level. When committee members indicate they are discontinuing, consider the future needs of the committee and the group and use the opportunity to encourage the involvement of people with suitable skills, experience or knowledge.*

Otherwise thriving groups occasionally failed or were not sustainable because of a lack of succession planning and no volunteers wanting to step up and take on a leadership role.

#### Strategy 2.

*Groups must have open discussion about succession and make plans on a regular basis including consideration of mentoring or coaching members into committee roles.*

Safe groups and spaces respect people's privacy and confidentiality. Likewise groups that function the best are those where committee discussions, particularly those which are difficult, are not discussed within the wider group or the LGBTI community. This is good role modelling for all members of the group and reinforces that privacy and confidentiality is important and that gossip is not tolerated.

Negative committee politics and how they played out in the community was found to have a deleterious impact on current members' involvement in the group as well as the overall perception of the group within the LGBTI community.

### Strategy 3.

*Leaders of groups must ensure that safe space rules apply to committee meetings to encourage open dialogue and ensure that discussion is respectful. When members take on a committee role, it is prudent that they sign confidentiality agreements with a clear understanding regarding what should and should not be discussed within the wider group or the LGBTI community.*

### Strategy 4.

*Consideration should be given to enforcing consequences for breaches of confidential information and other boundaries within the committee.*

Groups which had a diverse range of members were more successful. Groups which had attracted had a wide age demographic tended to have a clear and common purpose.

### Strategy 5.

*Have a discussion about the range and diversity of your group. If the group is lacking in diversity and there is a need and desire for that to be changed, examine whether the group's values and norms, activities, venue and purpose are relevant and or appealing to a diverse range of LGBTI people. If not, a cultural change process is required including changing formal documents such as the group's constitution.*

### Strategy 6.

*Ensure that the committee or leadership group is also diverse in different domains (sex, gender diversity, age, cultural background and abilities).*

Most of the groups in the study identified that they had little or no contact or experience with gender diverse members of the community and acknowledged that this was probably due to a perception that their group was for cisgender people only.

### Strategy 7.

*Groups need to examine what changes need to be made in order that gender diverse people feel welcome and included and participate in their group. This includes, but not limited to the values and attitudes of leaders, inclusivity of language in formal documents such as constitutions and language and imagery in promotional material and websites. Similarly, groups should consider promoting their group in publications and areas that might advertise the group as a trans\*-friendly space.*

Groups with safe space guidelines reported an active and vibrant membership and less conflict between members and within committees.

### Strategy 8.

*Leaders and committees are strongly encouraged to devise safe space guidelines or a code of conduct for the group as well as the process for ensuring they are enforced. Furthermore group leaders and committee members are responsible for modelling the guidelines or code so that it becomes normative behavior and the group collectively reinforces them.*

Groups with safe space guidelines found it easier to respond to challenging behaviours of members, using the guidelines as a point of reference to explaining why their behaviour was not appropriate and how it should change. Some leaders expressed frustration that it took someone displaying challenging behaviour before they devised guidelines and would have preferred a more proactive approach.

### Strategy 9.

*Committees are encouraged to have open and frank discussions about what constitutes inappropriate behaviour, how to deal with it, including a process that outlines who talks to the individual, and where and when that occurs.*

Groups that had a consistent, appropriate venue reported higher levels of membership and membership satisfaction.

### Strategy 10

*Leaders and committees may benefit from surveying their members to ask what they feel is important in a venue, and whether the current venue fits their needs.*

Events that had a common interest or goal for all group members were the most successful. Social events involving food were successful, whilst anything that required a special interest were generally low attended events.

### Strategy 11.

*Committees should seek ongoing feedback from current members about what activities they like to participate in and ensure there is an active social calendar.*

Groups which had a strong online presence and communicated with members were more active and vibrant.

### Strategy 12.

*Groups should review their communication processes in order to maintain contact with members in between events and gatherings.*

## 10.1 IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GLCS

Some groups expressed that they felt like they were in a perpetual cycle of struggling to maintain membership numbers or attract new members due to an inappropriate venue. A number of groups expressed an interest in GLCS assisting them with finding an affordable, appropriate and accessible venue. The current Freedom Centre premises were considered an appealing venue for a variety of groups.

### Recommendation 1.

*GLCS to assist groups to examine what suitable venues are available and how they may be accessed.*

Groups with a relatively open age demographic (18+) are struggling to access the younger community members (under 40), especially those who may be looking for ways to connect with the LGBTI community other than the club and pub scene. Key leaders expressed interest in GLCS helping them positively promote their group to this target demographic. This included cross promotion with other groups, to get already active members of the community involved in more than one group.

### Recommendation 2.

*GLCS in conjunction with other relevant groups such as the Freedom Centre to assist groups in how they may develop their appeal to under 40 LGBTI people. This may include facilitation of a forum(s) for groups for cross promotion and resource sharing.*

Some groups were of the view that that formal safe space guidelines were not applicable to their group, but still struggled with strong personalities and internal conflict.

### Recommendation 3.

*GLCS should consider providing a consultancy service for groups struggling with conflicts, including developing a guide for dealing with internal conflict for groups to discuss, use and adapt.*

Some groups were of the view that that formal safe space guidelines were not applicable to their group, but still struggled with strong personalities and internal conflict.

### Recommendation 4.

*GLCS to formulate a template for safe space guidelines for groups.*

Based on the experience of community groups participating in this project these guidelines could include but not be limited to:

- How to be respectful of all groups and celebrating diversity of gender, sex, age, spiritual beliefs, ethnicity or cultural backgrounds and ability levels
- Having a zero tolerance of physical, psychological, emotional and verbal abuse or harm
- Ensuring there is zero tolerance of bullying or other forms of disrespect including language and behaviour
- What is appropriate use and abuse of alcohol and other substances within the group space
- What constitutes appropriate boundaries between members including committee members
- Having 'pick-up' free space guidelines particularly when a group is wanting to encourage intergenerational activity OR mixed gender activity
- How to deal with behaviour which discourages inclusion such as friendship cliques and gossip
- Ensuring that members respect and follow instructions from leaders
- How to harness natural leaders who can model and reinforce appropriate behaviour

Some groups expressed an interest in receiving training on gender diversity and other specific skills such as phone etiquette and active listening skills.

### Recommendation 5

*GLCS to formulate a training package for groups to accompany the safe space guidelines.*

Some groups expressed that formal training was unappealing, but were extremely receptive to hearing the stories and personal experiences of young LGBTI people (possibly from Freedom Centre) and older LGBTI community members (possibly from Primetimers). This would give insight into the issues the different groups care about and what other groups could do to cater for them.

### **Recommendation 6**

*GLCS to consider facilitating opportunities for community members to hear the stories from different people in order to encourage discussion about diversity within their groups.*

Groups suggested that GLCS could act as a host to create a calendar with groups to organise activities and events to ensure that they do not clash.

### **Recommendation 7**

*GLCS to conduct a forum for all groups to get together to discuss common issues and dates for events.*

Groups expressed a lot of interest in collaboration as way of increasing interconnectedness within the community and as a way of increasing their membership ('sharing members'). For example, Freedom Centre members visiting PFLAG to talk about their perspectives, Pride and GLCS collaborating on community events, the Primetimers and the Bears collaborating on social events for older men.

### **Recommendation 8**

*GLCS to consider facilitating a discussion for groups to discuss collaboration and potential intergenerational collaboration*

Groups expressed frustration that at LGBTI community events, particularly Pride Fairday, the members of groups didn't get an opportunity to interact with each other as they were heavily involved in their own group.

### **Recommendation 9**

*GLCS should strongly consider hosting an event for community groups that does not involve committee members and key leaders having any host role but rather is for networking, discussing issues of mutual concerns and socialising.*

## 11. USEFUL TERMS

**Biphobia:** An individual's or society's misunderstanding, fear, ignorance of, or prejudice against bisexual and/or pansexual people.

**Bisexual:** Refers to people whose sexual and romantic feelings are for both men and women and who identify with these feelings. Many people may engage in bisexual behaviours but not identify as bisexual. See *also pansexual or omnisexual*.

**Cisgender:** Refers to people whose sense of their gender and/or sex matches the sex they were assigned at birth. Cisgender is the antonym of transgender.

**Gender Identity:** The label or name one uses to define and identify their gender or one's sense of being male or female and our sense of ourselves in regards to our gender, gender role, masculinity, androgyny and/or femininity. The most common gender identities are male and female, however there are many others in the gender diverse community such as genderqueer, trans man, trans woman, transgender, trans\*, boi, sistergirl, brotherboy, FTM / F2M (female to male), MTF / M2F (male to female) etc.

**Gender Diversity:** Used to describe a range of people that don't conform to gender expectations, including genderqueer, transgender, cross-dressing, drag performing, bigender and other gender diverse people.

**Heterosexism:** The attitude or belief that heterosexuality is more 'normal' or superior to other kinds of sexualities. It is heterosexist to assume that people are straight unless otherwise specified, or that you can 'tell' if someone is gay.

**Homophobia:** An individual's or society's misunderstanding, fear, ignorance of, or prejudice against gay, lesbian and/or bisexual people. 'Homophobia' is often also used as an umbrella term to include transphobia, biphobia and heterosexism.

**Intersex:** A person who is born with reproductive organs, genitalia and/or sex chromosomes that is not exclusively male or female. There are many different intersex differences which may or may not be visible or diagnosed.

**Lesbian:** Women whose sexual and romantic feelings are primarily for other women and who identify with those feelings.

**LGBTI:** Used as a recognisable acronym to collectively refer to a group of identities that includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender and intersex people and other sexuality and gender diverse people, regardless of their term of self-identification.

**Pansexual/Omnisexual:** Refers to people whose sexual and romantic feelings are for all genders; this rejects the gender binary of male/female and asserts that there are more than two genders or gender identities. 'Pan' and 'Omni' mean 'all'. These are inclusive terms that consider the gender diverse community.

**Queer:** Queer is an umbrella term used to refer to the LGBTI community. Some people in the LGBTI community prefer not to use this term as the history of the word had negative connotations. These days, the term has been embraced and is more about Pride and inclusivity.

**Trans\*:** An umbrella term including transsexual and transgender.

**Transgender:** An umbrella term used to describe a broad range of non-conforming gender identities and/or behaviours. Usually includes all trans\* people, but some transsexuals and members of the gender diverse community prefer not to use this term.

**Transphobia:** An individual's or society's misunderstanding, fear, ignorance of, or prejudice against people who experience transsexualism or identify as trans\*.

**Transsexual:** A person who identifies as the sex opposite to the one assigned at birth and who may choose to undergo sex affirmation/reassignment surgery.

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