

Te Ngākau Kahukura submission on the Ministry of Health's Mental Health and Wellbeing Long-Term Pathway

Moira from [Te Ngākau Kahukura](#) offered the following response to the Ministry of Health's [online consultation](#) in March 2021 to inform its development of a long-term pathway as part of the Government's response to [He Ara Oranga](#). The headings below reference the Mental Wellbeing Framework in the Ministry's [Kia Kaha, Kia Māia, Kia Ora Aotearoa: COVID-19 Psychosocial and Mental Wellbeing Plan](#).

Principles

Uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi – the principles of Te Tiriti underpin all actions in Kia Kaha.

Enable the mental health system to recognise and address the impacts of colonisation on Māori. Specifically with regards to takatāpui and Māori rainbow identities, this includes recognising the harms that were brought when rainbow identities were suppressed, criminalised and pathologised through the colonisation process.

Actions could include ensuring that all Māori mental health services, and wider population services that work with Māori, are supported to understand and value takatāpui identities by providing opportunities for ongoing learning and reflection. Prioritise takatāpui in strategies and investment. Share takatāpui-led information (such as the resources on [takatāpui.nz](#)) with professionals and whānau. Actively consult with and resource takatāpui leaders to contribute to mental health strategy and planning at all levels.

Equity – people have different levels of advantage and experience and require different approaches and resources to get equitable outcomes.

Equity issues for rainbow populations have been under-recognised for some time, despite evidence that rainbow people face some of the worst mental health disparities of any large demographic group in Aotearoa. To address this: ensure that rainbow equity is included as a key part of the health equity conversation, including by inviting appropriate expertise to contribute at conferences and leadership events. Ensure that this incorporates an intersectional understanding – for example, recognise that Māori and rainbow are overlapping and not distinct groups - all Māori responses should include a rainbow component and vice versa.

The Ministry should engage with rainbow community experts to develop a specific national rainbow mental health strategy. Some of the key areas this should cover would include:

- naming rainbow populations as a priority in all relevant mental health strategy and policy documents, including those focused on Māori and Pacific mental health;
- recognising that rainbow mental health issues are not confined to youth, but that there are population-specific factors to address across all ages, and specific issues for older rainbow people;
- targeting rainbow populations for investment, and supporting the development of a sustainable rainbow support sector (recognising that the current funding round is a helpful start towards this).

- ensuring rainbow data is captured in key health surveys (using the new Statistics New Zealand demographic standards, to be published shortly) and supporting rainbow researchers to undertake population data analysis.

People and whānau at the centre – whānau are a crucial part of the support network for individuals experiencing challenges. This principle seeks to strengthen the capacity of people and whānau to lead their own pathways to wellbeing.

Whānau relationships are some of the strongest protective factors and most significant risk factors for rainbow people. Research links whānau rejection with poor mental health outcomes and suicidality, while positive relationships are linked with reduced risk of poor outcomes. The concept of whānau involvement for rainbow people using mental health services can be fraught and complicated, and there needs to be space for whānau involvement to be determined by the individual at the centre.

In terms of specific actions, engage rainbow communities in any work around whānau involvement, and seek to develop guidance around safe and supportive whānau involvement that takes rainbow experiences into account. Ensure that there is an expansive understanding of whānau that recognises different family structures and chosen whānau, and recognises that some whānau members should not be involved, as determined by the individual. While this expansive understanding is articulated in policy documents, guidelines and professional development are needed to ensure front-line staff are supported to adopt a wider understanding and respect different kin relationships.

Community focus – strong communities provide a foundation of support and connection which is vital for mental wellbeing.

Rainbow communities, organisations and groups can be a significant source of support for people seeking to understand their identity, find friendships and relationships, and navigate discrimination or rejection they may be facing from the wider world.

As part of mental health promotion and building wellbeing, invest in rainbow community infrastructure to enable communities to provide ongoing support, and to formally evaluate the positive mental health impacts of their work. Support minority communities within the rainbow population to develop sustainable groups and support structures. Ensure rainbow communities are among those targeted for community interventions like suicide prevention training. Support community-wide initiatives to address discrimination and social exclusion as social determinants of health.

Uphold human rights – human rights are central to implementing an effective, equitable and balanced future mental health and addiction system.

Rainbow people currently experience barriers to realising their right to health and healthcare. Research shows that compared with others, rainbow people are less likely to be able to access healthcare when it is needed, more likely to delay or avoid access because of anticipated discrimination, and more likely to receive unsatisfactory care.

Dedicated work is needed to address this across the whole healthcare system, including quality improvement programmes, development of targeted services, organisational strategies, standards

and guidelines, staff training, ongoing supervision, and other actions. This also requires engaging appropriate rainbow expertise at all levels, for example creating roles within the Ministry and at key points in the system that have responsibility for rainbow equity.

Collaboration – working together is vital to create stability, efficiency and enhanced support for New Zealanders.

A significant amount of expertise in rainbow mental health is held in community organisations, and with key individuals who are not employed in the mental health sector. There are key differences between the rainbow community support sector and the sectors that work with other minority demographic groups, and there is a level of expertise in understanding the nature of the sector and dynamics associated with how it works.

As part of developing the long-term pathway, it is essential that the Ministry actively engages with rainbow community expertise as early as possible, and involves wider rainbow communities throughout the process. As an early step, this should include establishing a structure such as a high level rainbow advisory group to help design a structure for collaboration and engagement.

Innovation – innovative and original approaches to mental and social wellbeing support will facilitate transformation of the mental health and addiction system.

Peer-led services offer some of the most promising approaches to mental health and wellbeing support. In the rainbow support sector, peer-led organisations provide a range of wellbeing support services and supportive community structures that are often designed with limited resources, based on a close understanding of community needs.

One way of supporting these types of innovation to grow and thrive would be to support action research and evaluation that sits alongside rainbow community organisations, and works with them to understand their impact and continuously improve the services they offer.

Focus areas

What support is most needed to build the ability of communities to initiate and lead mental wellbeing initiatives?

The rainbow support sector has been underrecognised for some time, and the funding round currently being offered is the first sustained mental health funding that has been offered to these organisations. Sustained and reliable funding is a key enabler for this community sector. Alongside this, it is essential that the Ministry engages with community expertise to design any further investment. This will ensure investment is targeted in more effective ways, and can minimise the potential harm of competitive funding in this sector.

Strategic recognition is another key enabler - having rainbow populations recognised and named in all key strategy and policy documents, so that rainbow work is recognised and valued in population-specific services as well as within wider population services, and within services for Māori, Pacific and other populations. Developing a specific rainbow mental health strategy, recognising the diversity within the rainbow population, would provide direction and support to community organisations.

Finally, providing capacity for evaluation and action research would support communities to understand their impact and contribute towards a stronger evidence base for community-led actions.

What examples of mental health and addiction services are working well, and what makes these successful?

Rainbow-led peer support services, such as those offered by RainbowYOUTH, OUTLine, Qtopia, Gender Minorities Aotearoa and other community organisations across the country. A specific example is the transgender peer support service run by RainbowYOUTH and OUTLine, with funding from the Northern DHBs.

Such services are successful because they are developed by and with the communities they serve, and are based on a nuanced and grounded understanding of community needs. They are delivered by people who bring relevant lived experience in terms of rainbow identities, and meet clear individual needs.

Enablers

Workforce – growing and supporting a sustainable, diverse, competent and confident mental health and addiction workforce.

Ensuring that the entire workforce is supported to develop competence and confidence in working with rainbow people. As well as opportunities for individual professional development, learning and reflection, this requires system intervention to introduce rainbow content into tertiary training programmes, growing professional expectations of competent rainbow practice through health professional bodies, incentivising service providers to value rainbow competence (for example, by requiring all providers who receive public funding to commit to developing a rainbow competent workforce), addressing workplace cultures so that rainbow staff are safe at work, and including a rainbow strand across all workforce development initiatives.

Information and data – timely, accurate and comprehensive information and data will be crucial for longer-term success.

There are significant gaps in research and service data around rainbow populations and mental health, which in some cases are complicated and controversial to address. Following the current Statistics NZ process to develop a new Sex and Gender Standard, the Ministry should work with appropriate rainbow expertise to identify how best to use this standard, as well as the recent Sexual Identity Standard, to capture data appropriately and without introducing safety issues or other harms for rainbow populations.

As well as changing guidelines and technology systems, this will require workforce training to support understanding of rainbow identity concepts, and appropriate ways of raising these topics in healthcare settings.

Policy and regulation – policy decisions and legislative changes set the framework within which on-the-ground services operate.

While rainbow populations have started to be recognised in relevant policy documents, this is not routine (for example, rainbow populations were only added to the 'Kia Kaha, Kia Mnia, Kia Ora Aotearoa' plan following community advocacy. To achieve equity, rainbow populations must be recognised and named across key policies, including those for Māori and Pacific health.

Several wider legislative changes have been signalled as priorities for the current government that will support rainbow wellbeing by addressing discrimination and creating a more accepting social and cultural environment. The Ministry should seek to support these changes, which include expanding the Human Rights Act to encompass discrimination on the grounds of gender identity, gender expression and variations of sex characteristics, banning conversion practices, banning medically unnecessary surgeries on intersex infants, and supporting self-determination of gender through the Births, Deaths, Marriages and Relationships Registration Bill.

Investment – ongoing investments and enhancements to existing funding arrangements will be critical for ensuring people in Aotearoa New Zealand have free and easy access to a range of mental wellbeing support.

Growing sustainable funding for rainbow mental health will be critical to addressing equity for this population. To begin with, investing in a national rainbow mental health strategy that is developed with communities will help to target further investment. Sustained funding is needed for services provided by rainbow-led community organisations, as well as for those located within wider population service organisations. Investment into growing the capability and confidence of the wider mental health sector to work with rainbow populations is also essential.

Further to this, the Ministry should seek to support increased investment into gender-affirming healthcare, in consultation with transgender communities and the Professional Association for Transgender Health Aotearoa. For many transgender people, accessing gender-affirming healthcare is essential to their wellbeing. Currently, access is limited and inadequate, and demand is growing.

Technology – ensuring resources reach people with limited access to digital technology is a priority.

Many rainbow community organisations make use of technology in providing support services, for example many were able to remain open online during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Investment into rainbow support should take technology options into account.

With the growth of technology-enabled support services, there is potential for harm towards rainbow populations through poor design (for example, inappropriate choices of language related to body parts or sexual practices, or requiring a choice between binary gender options) or through exposure to online harrasment. Technology-enabled services should be required to engage with rainbow expertise to identify and remove, or mitigate, these potential harms.

Care is also needed to address digital divides. Recent research indicates that access to devices and data were significant barriers for rainbow young people seeking to access support during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Without unmediated access to technology, rainbow young people who live in unsupportive family environments can face barriers related to privacy and safety.

Leadership – effective communication, collaboration and guidance from leaders will help ensure responses are coordinated, mental wellbeing needs are met, and individuals and whānau feel supported.

As an area that has been underrecognised by government and the wider mental health sector, a significant amount of expertise and leadership in rainbow mental health is held in community roles. Mental health leadership initiatives should recognise rainbow community leadership, and seek to reduce barriers to involvement for community-based leaders. For example, initiatives should not require people to be employed by organisations that are funded by the Ministry, and reduced fees and scholarships should be offered to community-based leaders to participate in initiatives where there is a participation cost.

Rainbow expertise should be valued in the system transformation project, for example by creating key leadership roles or a collaborative leadership group including community and government stakeholders.

What are the key longer-term shifts (ie, in the next 6-10 years) you think are needed to support system transformation?

As well as the shifts described earlier in this submission, four key areas that require focus to support system transformation are:

- Development of a national rainbow mental health strategy to target systems change to achieve rainbow equity. Since these issues have been systemically under-recognised, a targeted approach is needed to address the population's needs.
- Investment into rainbow expertise at a level that would enable rainbow input across all initiatives and services.
- Significantly increased investment and a national strategy to provide gender-affirming healthcare
- Systemic change and a national strategy to address create a health system that is safe, affirming and effective for intersex people

Other thoughts

This consultation process will not have been an effective way of engaging with rainbow communities. It requires a high degree of understanding of and engagement with the Ministry's current strategy, it was largely communicated to people already engaged with the Ministry, and was offered on too short of a timeframe for community advocates like myself to effectively share it with wider networks.

It is essential that the Ministry engages directly with population groups and sectors where it does not already have active working relationships. It has been frustrating to see significant missed opportunities for rainbow input across the Ministry's work on responding to the Mental Health Inquiry and the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. I have personally assisted the Ministry in the past to undertake consultation with rainbow communities, and would welcome an opportunity to support development of an engagement approach.