

Discussion paper: Does the ACT need an LGBTIQ+ peak body?

December 2022

Background

In the ACT, there is no peak body representing LGBTIQ+ people or organisations providing services to LGBTIQ+ people. The question of whether the ACT needs a peak body for LGBTIQ+ health and wellbeing is one that arises from time to time, including within the Office of LGBTIQ+ Affairs, in the ACT Health Scoping Study, in the commissioning process for peak bodies, and by individual stakeholders. This discussion paper outlines the arguments for and against establishing an LGBTIQ+ peak body in the ACT, and presents some alternative options to establishing a new, separate organisation.

What is a peak body?

There are differing views on how a peak organisation should be defined. As part of the peak activity commissioning process, ACT Health Directorate and Community Services Directorate developed the following definition of a peak body in consultation with key stakeholders:

A representative non-government organisation, the primary purpose of which is to provide membership engagement and support, coordination, advocacy and representation, information dissemination services, relevant research, policy and sector development services for the Represented Group and other interested parties.¹

A peak body's members may be organisations, individuals, or both. A sector may be represented by a peak body at the state and territory level, the national level, or both (in which case, the state peaks are usually members of the national peak).

The role of a peak body does not include service delivery to individual community members; however, some organisations that are peak bodies also deliver services. This has advantages, such as an organisation using learnings from their service delivery to inform their advocacy. It also has disadvantages, such as causing conflict or competition with member organisations.

¹ ACT Government (n.d.). *Sector Update: ACT Government Funding of Peak Activity Commissioning 2021-22*.
https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1954369/Peaks-strategy-and-design.pdf

Meridian uses the initialism LGBTIQ+ to refer to people of diverse genders, sexualities, and sex characteristics, including but not limited to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, asexual, agender, non-binary, gender fluid, pansexual, and people who have an intersex variation. We recognise that the initialism does not capture the full diversity of sexualities, bodies, identities, and experiences that exist within our community. However, we also recognise the value of the term when exploring collective experiences of stigma, discrimination, and marginalisation, and when advocating for LGBTIQ+ rights and inclusivity. In this document, we also use LGBTIQ+ when citing ACT Government documents to align with the Government terminology.

Who represents organisations providing services to LGBTIQ+ people in the ACT?

LGBTIQ+ health and wellbeing service providers are represented at a national level by LGBTIQ+ Health Australia. However, there is no peak body in the ACT representing organisations providing services to LGBTIQ+ people, and there is no peak body in the ACT funded to represent LGBTIQ+ people.

Both A Gender Agenda (AGA) and Meridian show leadership in the ACT community in providing functions that might be provided by a peak body, such as advocacy, research, and information dissemination. Other organisations that play an important role in supporting LGBTIQ+ individuals, families, and communities include (but are not limited to) Sexual Health Family Planning ACT (SHFPACT), the Junction Youth Centre, YWCA of Canberra, Headspace, and Diversity ACT.

The ACT Government has shown significant leadership on issues relevant to the LGBTIQ+ community, including positioning these issues as central to health, social, and economic policy making. The Office of LGBTIQ+ Affairs, located within the Chief Minister's Directorate, provides a central point of contact and coordination on policy areas of interest and importance to the LGBTIQ+ community. The LGBTIQ+ Ministerial Advisory Council provides a forum for individuals to provide strategic advice to the ACT Government on issues affecting LGBTIQ+ communities in the ACT. However, these mechanisms do not provide a voice for service delivery organisations, and the leadership shown by the ACT Government has not, at this time, translated to adequate funding for the LGBTIQ+ service sector.

What would be the benefits of having an LGBTIQ+ health and wellbeing peak body in the ACT?

A peak body would ensure LGBTIQ+ people are represented in commissioning and other ACT Government processes

A core function of peak bodies includes assisting government to ensure that its policies and priorities reflect community interest and community need. Peak bodies have a bridging role, engaging with members and distilling their perspectives into the language and processes of government. For example, the ACT Government has recognised that peak bodies play an important role in contributing to commissioning processes and supporting their stakeholders to participate in service planning and design activities.

While the current ACT Government has demonstrated a commitment to consulting LGBTIQ+ organisations and communities in policy making, there is no peak body to formalise and embed this work. In a different political environment, there is a risk that the voices of LGBTIQ+ people and service delivery organisations would not be heard.

A peak body could increase the influence of LGBTIQ+ organisations

A growing sector needs coordinated action and a collective voice on issues of concern. Progress on LGBTIQ+ issues has been achieved through constant vigilance for opportunities to improve outcomes, while resisting political pressure to wind back hard-fought gains. A peak body would provide the infrastructure for coordinated and robust conversations within the LGBTIQ+ community and a mechanism for establishing a collective position for advocacy. An effective peak body would provide points of coalescence on key issues while preserving the ability of constituent organisations and individuals to express alternate views in their own capacity. This means that a peak body can advise government both when there is a shared view and where there are diverse views in the sector, which is particularly useful for small or emerging organisations that serve underrepresented sectors of the community.

A peak body would provide government with a central point of contact

While the Office of LGBTIQ+ Affairs currently provides a central point of contact for policy coordination on areas of interest and importance to the LGBTIQ+ community, there is no guarantee that future governments under fiscal pressure would retain the function in the Chief Minister's Directorate. An LGBTIQ+ peak body would provide a central point of contact to coordinate communications between the government and service providers working with and representing LGBTIQ+ people.

A peak body would enable LGBTIQ+ organisations to focus on service delivery

The lack of an LGBTIQ+ peak body in the ACT places an increased demand on service providers to perform the functions of a peak body, such as undertaking research, writing government submissions, advocating for their communities, and facilitating coordination within the sector. This takes away time and resources from their core function: service delivery. Dedicated funding for these functions will become increasingly important as service providers manage increased demands for their time. Additionally, a peak body could support the development and sustainability of smaller organisations that serve specific sub-populations within LGBTIQ+ communities.

A peak body would be less constrained by its financial dependence on government

While funding agreements do not prohibit community organisations from advocacy and lobbying, community organisations may choose not to challenge government policy or decisions to protect their relationship with their funder. While peak bodies are often also reliant on government funding, their relationships (and funding agreements) with government are built around the expectations associated with an advocacy and lobbying role.

A peak body would strengthen accountability within the sector

A peak body would provide a mechanism for driving increased accountability within the sector and an opportunity for developing consistent governance and policy. Organisations that serve the LGBTIQ+ community are at differing points in their development with different governance systems and maturity. A well-run peak body would help members develop consistency in governance, provide support in accessing suitable training and advice for members, and advocate to government when additional training and capability building is necessary for the sector.

What are the arguments *against* establishing an LGBTIQ+ health and wellbeing peak body in the ACT?

The LGBTIQ+ health and wellbeing sector in the ACT is not large enough to justify a peak body

LGBTIQ+ people access a range of services in the ACT, and some mainstream service providers deliver targeted programs to LGBTIQ+ communities; however, only two organisations have a membership base representing LGBTIQ+ people and provide specialist services to these communities: Meridian and AGA. These organisations are represented by a national peak (LGBTIQ+ Health Australia), and no other state or territory has a locally based peak body for organisations providing services to LGBTIQ+ people. It would be difficult to justify such an organisation when the ACT is a small jurisdiction, with an interconnected community that allows informal negotiations and coalescence on issues of concern.

The small, interconnected nature of the ACT LGBTIQ+ community and sector would also make it challenging for a peak body to remain impartial when managing diverse interests in the sector.

Mainstream organisations that deliver specialist services to LGBTIQ+ people are already represented by other peak bodies, such as the ACT Council of Community Services and the Youth Coalition. The roles and relationships between mainstream organisations, mainstream peak bodies, and an LGBTIQ+ peak body would need to be carefully defined to avoid duplication.

A peak body would add a layer of bureaucracy between LGBTIQ+ people and the government

The ACT's two LGBTIQ+ organisations (Meridian and AGA) are both peer led and embedded in their communities. As such, they are best positioned to represent and advocate for the needs of their members and service users. Adding another layer between LGBTIQ+ people and government could diminish rather than strengthen their voice.

LGBTIQ+ people should be represented across the community sector

LGBTIQ+ people have diverse needs and interests beyond their gender, sexuality, and intersex variations. These intersecting needs and interests should be represented by other peak bodies.

The key functions of a peak are already being performed

Both Meridian and AGA have a proven record of effectively performing the functions of a peak body, including advocacy, representation, and sector development. Meridian provides services and support broadly to the LGBTIQ+ communities, while AGA provides a specific peer-led focus on trans, gender diverse, and intersex (TGD&I) communities.

A peak body would draw resources away from service delivery

The community sector, including the LGBTIQ+ health and wellbeing sub-sector, is underfunded. An LGBTIQ+ peak body could draw financial resources away from service delivery, putting further stress on LGBTIQ+ organisations to deliver more services with less funding. Additionally, the ACT has a small pool of LGBTIQ+ people with expertise in LGBTIQ+ health and wellbeing: a peak body would create greater competition for staff.

A peak body may not be financially sustainable

A peak body that is reliant on government funding would be in a perilous position if government policy on funding peaks changed. If this occurred, a peak body would need to secure independent funding, which would again be drawing resources away from service delivery.

What are alternative options to establishing a new peak body?

Establishing a new, separate organisation to serve as the peak body for LGBTIQ+ services and people in the ACT is not the only option for ensuring that the functions of a peak body are performed. The following section provides some alternatives that could be considered.

Option A — Resource ACTCOSS to perform peak functions

The ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) represents not-for-profit community organisations and advocates for social justice in the ACT. ACTCOSS is already the peak for service delivery organisations, and it could be resourced to ensure a dedicated role for coordinating and advocating for organisations that provide services to LGBTIQ+ people in Canberra.

Option B — Establish a collaborative MOU for peak functions

Organisations in the ACT that serve LGBTIQ+ people could establish a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to work together to provide peak functions. Such an MOU could include both the LGBTIQ+ specialist organisations (Meridian and AGA) and mainstream service providers, such as SHFPACT, YWCA Canberra, and Diversity ACT. Under this model, it would be important to identify how the work under the MOU would be funded.

Option C — Resource existing organisations to provide input to government processes

As outlined above, Meridian and AGA already fulfil some of the functions of peak bodies that are valued by government, such as connecting community members to government processes and ensuring community input on key policy issues. This work is an unfunded contribution to the ACT community. Given the increasing strain on this underfunded sector, it is important to provide additional funding to these organisations to undertake this work.

Option D — Expand Meridian and AGA’s role in strengthening existing peak bodies

Meridian and AGA already play an important role in strengthening the capacity of mainstream services to meet the needs of LGBTIQ+ people. With appropriate funding, this work could be expanded to support the ACT’s existing peak bodies to better represent the intersecting needs and interests of LGBTIQ+ people.

Next steps

If the question of whether the ACT should establish an LGBTIQ+ peak body continues to arise, it is recommended that a formal consultation process is conducted with key stakeholders.