

# Submission on the consultation draft National Alcohol Strategy 2018-2026

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ReachOut Australia welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft National Alcohol Strategy 2018-2026, which outlines Australia's agreed approach to preventing and minimising alcohol-related harms. ReachOut's specific interest in the draft National Alcohol Strategy is under Priority 3: Supporting individuals to obtain help and systems to respond; and Priority 4: Promoting healthier communities.

ReachOut.com is a frontline youth mental health service, built with smart digital technology, that provides content, tools and personalised help that is free, accessible anytime and focused on self-help and early intervention. Optimised for mobile devices, it puts help in the pockets of young people everywhere. With an everyday issues approach, our aim is to help young people find the help that works for them.

Online services are increasingly becoming a critical first step in a young person's helpseeking journey. ReachOut is designed to overcome many of the barriers to helpseeking – stigma, cost, waiting times, transport, a fear of breach of confidentiality and a preference for self-reliance – and has been shown to play a pivotal role in increasing helpseeking intentions<sup>1</sup>. Our research has shown that a significant proportion of young people experiencing distress still do not seek help from a professional, and we must continue to explore new and innovative ways to facilitate helpseeking.

ReachOut helps young people by providing immediate help and support (self-help); in rural and regional areas, access to alternative forms of helpseeking where face-to-face services may be some distance away; and getting young people to the right service more quickly. As part of the National Alcohol Strategy, frontline digital services like ReachOut, have a role to raise awareness of alcohol-related harm (amplifying messages through our networks and channels) and supporting young people and their parents, with self-help strategies and where required, ongoing support.

## What is ReachOut?

ReachOut is accessed by 132,000 people in Australia every month; or more than 1.58 million people each year.

Since its inception in 1997, ReachOut has co-designed programs and products with young people, ensuring that the evidence-based digital tools, and information and support a

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<sup>1</sup> ReachOut Annual Survey. 2013

young person accesses on ReachOut are relevant and delivered in a way that makes sense to them.

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

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

## ReachOut's role in preventing and raising awareness of alcohol-related harm

Large-scale population surveys demonstrate worrying levels of substance use among young people<sup>2</sup>. While no single risk factor predicts problematic substance use, the balance between risk and protective factors is key to positive outcomes<sup>3</sup>. Appropriate helpseeking can reduce long-term health and social impacts of substance use and mental health problems<sup>4</sup>. Research consistently shows that adolescents do not seek help for health concerns - including substance use - from health professionals<sup>5,6</sup>. ReachOut's user

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<sup>2</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). 2010 National Drug Strategy Household Survey Report

<sup>3</sup> Spooner C, Hetherington K. Social determinants of drug use (NDARC Technical Report No. 228). Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, 2005

<sup>4</sup> Eckersley R. Never better – or getting worse? The health & wellbeing of young Australians. Canberra: National Centre for Epidemiology & Population Health., ANU; 2008

<sup>5</sup> Reavley NJ, Cvetkovski S, Jorm AF, Lubman DI. Help-seeking for substance use, anxiety and affective disorders among young people: results from the 2007 Australian National Survey on Mental Health and Wellbeing. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 2010; 44(8): 729-35

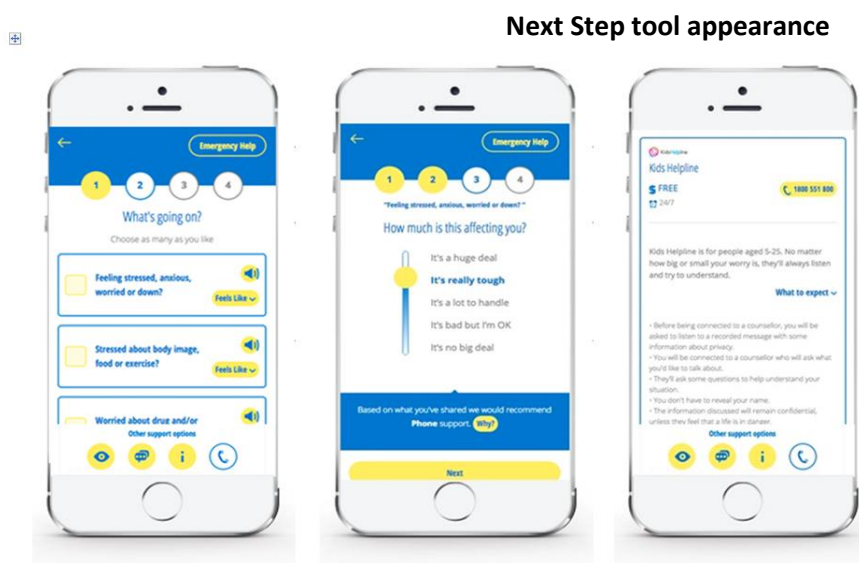
<sup>6</sup> Kang M, Bernanrd D, Usherwood T et al. Better Practise in Youth Health. Final report on research study. Access to healthcare among young people in NSW: Phase 2. Westmead: NSW Centre for the Advancement of Adolescent Health, The Children's Hospital at Westmead, 2005

research indicates young people want control over their health decisions. **They readily search for support online and present at ReachOut before they are willing to access professional support.** ReachOut recently launched an innovative tool (ReachOut NextStep) that guides young people to help resources, peer and professional support, based on their concerns, needs and preferences, and has demonstrated positive impact<sup>7</sup>.

There is an opportunity to reflect the role of services like ReachOut in achieving the objectives outlined in Priority 3 and Priority 4, complementary to alcohol and other drug specific services and to reach those who would not normally be seeking help. At the individual level ReachOut helps young people to engage in health promotion activities, learn healthy behaviours associated with substance use, increase awareness of the wide range of potential support services and increase their intention to seek help. At a service delivery level, by using a stepped-care approach the ReachOut NextStep tool better matches young people with appropriate support, thereby reducing pressure on the healthcare system. ReachOut Parents supports parents to access information and strategies to support their teenager, with the option of coaching for additional one-on-one support.

## Smart tools: ReachOut NextStep

ReachOut NextStep was developed as part of a project led by ReachOut in partnership with the University of Melbourne and the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre. The aim of the NextStep project was to develop and evaluate a service model to facilitate helpseeking by providing a gateway to relevant and personalised mental health information, resources and services.



ReachOut NextStep, designed for and with young people, is now an important feature of the ReachOut service (ReachOut.com) and in providing a referral pathway when additional support is required, beyond self-help.

The NextStep tool is the outcome of a co-design and development process with the aim of:

- relieving distress / increasing positive affect
- simplifying the helpseeking process
- decreasing barriers to access
- increasing journey satisfaction and service awareness
- increasing intentions to seek help (and service use).

NextStep is accessible anytime and from any device and for young people:

- provides them with a place to start and show them what's next
- walks them through the process
- validates their feelings and shows them they are not alone
- provides them with a sense of hope
- tunes into their changing needs
- makes it easy to act and connect to support.

As part of developing NextStep ReachOut drew on the expertise of 10 leading mental health service providers. More than 600 young Australians participated in the project through helpseeking workshops; concept testing; prototype and user experience testing; the randomised control trial; functionality workshops; content and multimedia workshops; and ongoing through a youth advisory group.

The NextStep randomised control trial (RCT) demonstrated it was a more satisfactory approach to helpseeking (compared to usual helpseeking strategies), reduced negative affect and improved quality of life up to three months after using the tool (as measured by the AQoL).

NextStep today references 90 symptoms, 12 issues, five severity levels for each issue, 25 apps and tools, 5 online forums, 14 chat services, 41 phone services, 28 face-to-face services, 29 practical tips, 250+ articles and stories, 12 videos, 60 pathways and thousands of possible combinations.

NextStep has been developed as a 'widget' and can be made available on sites external to ReachOut, for example, service providers, universities and schools.

There is an opportunity to use smart tools like ReachOut Next Step to support young people at risk and triage them to appropriate support.

## Conclusions

Tools like ReachOut NextStep provide a range of personalised support options, helping young people to access the level of support they need. Well-developed digital self-help options can ensure young people with emerging issues have quicker access to less-intensive interventions. They also provide an alternative means of information and support for young people who face barriers to accessing more traditional mental health services, and respond to young people's desire for autonomy and anonymity.

Digital services are scalable, offering an opportunity to help high numbers of young people; they are cost-effective, providing help quickly and efficiently across a high number of young people with little investment; and they can reduce pressure on the clinical system, leading to a stronger stepped care approach where young people get faster access to the level of service they need.

**There is a clear opportunity for national coordination of efforts to support young people and their parents to take action, and raise awareness and prevent alcohol-related harm.**