

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Benalla — 11 April 2006

Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield

Mr R. G. Mitchell

Mr B. P. Hardman

Mr C. Ingram

Mr J. M. McQuilten

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman

Deputy Chair: Mr C. Ingram

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms L. Topic

Research Officer: Dr P. Chen

Witness

Ms R. C. Allen, chief executive officer, Cutting Edge Uniting Care (affirmed).

The CHAIR — Welcome, Rowena and John. I have a statement to read before we begin. Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act this committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise all present at these hearings that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege.

We are an all-party parliamentary committee, including an Independent, hearing evidence today on the inquiry into retaining and attracting back young people to country Victoria. Welcome, Rowena. Could you please state your full name and address and, if you are representing an organisation, advise what your position within that organisation is?

Ms ALLEN — Rowena Clare Allen, [ADDRESS REMOVED] Violet Town. I am the chief executive officer of Cutting Edge Uniting Care, and I am representing that agency this afternoon.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Your evidence will be taken down and will become public evidence in due course. Could you please make your statement and put in your comments, and we will have some questions for you following that.

Ms ALLEN — Thank you for the opportunity to come to present to you today. I have had a look at the people who are presenting to you, and there is a wealth of information around education, training and transport. I will cover those issues very briefly, but I thought, considering you are going right around the state, there may be two particular groups of young people who may not get a mention. So today I will focus on the refugee and newly arrived young people into rural areas, and also on same-sex attracted and transgendered young people.

Firstly, I would like to talk about the general lack of education pathways and options. My background, as I said, is as chief executive of Cutting Edge Uniting Care. For 10 years we have been running in Shepparton, Cobram and Seymour — Ben's hometown — and we have seen a number of issues, but transport for young people and their options around education and training pathways have been consistent for the 10 years. When young people are looking at future directions about where they might study and what they might do, these are the major concerns.

There are a couple of reports that I have given you here. I will take you to the recommendations in the Youth Empowerment project. Basically this could be for any group of rural young people, I believe. This was based in Seymour, but could be in Cobram, Shepparton or, I dare to say, other regions. They want to know about youth services. These are things that are important to them — where they are and that they are youth friendly. Often we hear this from young people — about having access to services, services that are relevant to them, things that they want to participate in, and general recreation. They certainly make friends now by the Internet with Melbourne young people and they can compare the enormous differences about what is available in Melbourne to those young people and what is available in rural areas. That is a constant thing. We are often asked to take excursions and trips to Melbourne.

Again, in the Mitchell Youth Forum, which was in September of 2005, transport came up — transport not just for education pathways, but transport for recreational opportunities as well. They are just two general reports from this region.

One of the things I am involved with and am a member of is the Learning Employment Skills Commission for Minister Kosky. That overlooks and funds the local learning employment network and industry training advisory bodies and different things. I am happy in question time to talk more about young people's pathways through education.

As I said, what I want to focus on is the Young Refugees in the Picture project, which is the third report I have given you. This is the report we did just this year, which identifies the needs of migrant refugee young people. I think this group of young people are really untapped in relation to being able to keep them in rural Victoria and maximise the skills and cultural wealth they have to offer. They are a transient group by nature, so it is not difficult for them to feel that they can pack up and leave again; they have already left their country of origin. So the first four years are what we are finding is really important. If they have a supportive experience in arriving in the Goulburn Valley — that is our experience, in the Goulburn Valley — we have more chance of retaining them here.

The things that we found out in the report — and these two paragraphs in my report here are just straight recommendations from the Young Refugees in the Picture project — are that there is a significant lack of English language support. That is both in the secondary school and TAFE education system — again, the pathways for education and training and a lack of social and recreational opportunities. This is particularly important around single-gender recreation programs for this group. Again there are more opportunities in Melbourne for that, and sometimes they need to make the move for those reasons.

I refer to a general racism or intolerance and stereotyping in workplaces. This has been around for a long time — you know, the ‘Fix that guys, and fix world peace while you’re there’. These are hard things, but if we can make communities that are tolerant, we have more chance of keeping these young people. Again they are not unique to the CALD, or the culturally and linguistically diverse group, but they are important in relation to keeping them here.

I refer to same-sex attracted and transgendered young people’s experience. Again this is a highly transient population or group within our community. Cutting Edge has been running, as I said, for 10 years. We were the first, that I know of, rural support group for same-sex attracted young people based in Shepparton. Five years on there were about 15; now there are 31 across the state.

What we do know, and we have been quite active in some of the work and resources, is that La Trobe University’s study ‘Writing themselves in again’, which is a national study, has clearly identified that 1 in 10 young people question their sexuality or identify as anything but heterosexual. If you look at it, 1 in 10 rural Victorian young people are questioning their sexuality at some point along the way.

A lot of young people we work with see coming out in a rural area as not the way to go, and they like to do that in Melbourne or Sydney or anywhere else bar Shepparton, Cobram, Seymour, Merrigum and everywhere else. So you are actually losing a huge population of young people. These young people are articulate generally, highly skilled and are focused on education because that is their ticket out of where they are.

In our work we are often working with young people in that category who do not go on to university and have not reached that academic level. They are the ones we generally support within our support groups, because they are dealing with issues about coming out, telling their families, trying to find a safe school to study in or trying to find safe employment options. The others just disappear — they are straight off to Melbourne or Sydney and straight into university. The ones that we know of — and there are multiple examples — are the architects, doctors, lawyers, land surveyors and engineers. It is very difficult to get those young people to come back to rural or regional Victoria. They do much later in life, but they are making choices. Often they go down to Melbourne, they meet their life partner, and there is a culture down there.

Often these young people do not have a positive experience in Melbourne. They think that coming out and going to Melbourne will be fantastic and fix everything, and they realise that they are country kids and that they do not necessarily fit in with the Melbourne culture either. So they are living in this kind of grey land between loving the land and wanting to live in a rural area but not feeling very open or welcomed within their communities. There are a lot of generalisations in there, but if you start looking at the population and how many people there are in that category across Victoria, we are talking about quite a large group.

What are the answers to any of that — I have looked at your terms of reference — and what are the factors? I could sum it up with: just a sense of how welcome young people feel in rural communities, whether that is because they are from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, or whether they are of a different sexuality. I should say I have also included transgendered young people in here. In the last 10 years we have seen an increase. It is a very small population group, but still it is younger and younger — young people who are questioning not only their sexuality but are also questioning their gender.

Frankly, I have said to those young people — ‘Ta-ta, see you in Melbourne’. There is nothing, and I do not expect in the next five years — Melbourne struggles enough with gender dysphoria clinics and services, let alone trying to have rurally sensitive and appropriate support and counselling. I am talking about 18-to-25 year olds, around that area. But we are seeing young people, younger and younger, questioning not only their sexuality but also their gender.

The sorts of things we do include trying to run information within schools. We do a lot of support for parents and families of young people. Now, I suppose 10 years on, we are getting a lot of 18-to-30 year olds coming back — some of them come back — and they are wanting to provide more support.

What is my wish list for the future? Point 3 on the second page focuses on newly arrived and refugee young people. There are five dot points here. Basically it is for young people to have that first initial experience, a positive experience in the country and in country schools. It is to be able to attend an intensive language centre prior to being at school. Funding for English as a second language support in schools is pretty limited. Often these young people, as I said, have arrived, maybe, in the last three years, but there would not be one young person who has arrived into rural Victoria who has not either seen a member of their family die or know someone who has died, so we put them all into the category of post-traumatic stress disorder.

You could imagine a young person trying to deal with that while they are trying to learn a language and find their way around and everything else. The way that ESL was set up and offered is very limited if they are not ready to do it straight away. There needs to be some flexibility around English as a second language support.

Cross-cultural education in secondary schools is really important, and there are some terrific examples of schools that are doing some amazing things around this, but there need to be some more resources. Those things do not just happen, they actually need to be resourced.

General homework and support — there are a number of rural groups for refugees; there are a number of volunteer groups that could be engaged I think in doing some of this work.

Induction — we assume sometimes that after the six months of commonwealth settlement service funding, people really know and understand rural life, and that is not something that can be guaranteed.

There is a lack of critical mass within nationalities, so there is a draw to Melbourne, particularly with the Sudanese who are the most recent in the Goulburn Valley. There are bigger populations of Sudanese young people in Melbourne, so there is a draw to that as well. We really need to be alert to being able to provide options, real education and real employment options; that may actually bring some of those young people, particularly around agriculture as they come from rural areas. So there is an opportunity there to help them settle in rural areas for themselves.

Just some social and recreational opportunity ideas there that came out of the report. On the last page there is reference to the same-sex attracted young people, again out of the La Trobe University report, but there is also a parliamentary action plan which was produced by the ministerial advisory committee on gay and lesbian health that is really clear — I will leave these documents here — on recommendations around local government's role, around the education department's role particularly around rural young people and it did come up with a number of things.

The report says that 'Australian research suggests that same-sex attracted young people in rural areas are at particular risk of depression and attempted suicide'. That is probably another inquiry. They are the issues that this group is facing and the reasons why they are actually taking off to Melbourne.

Again, similar to the cultural group, the next group is educating school nurses and professionals around the specific health needs of families being affected. The development of Internet-based support seems to be a growing medium where rural and remote young people are finding support. There are two groups that run in the Hume region which we are in now. One is ours in Shepparton and another is Upper Hume Community Health based in Wodonga. There are a lot of towns within that where young people can actually make it to those groups. They are finding that the Internet is a form of being able to connect.

There is developing locally diverse framework policies and practices in local services and in local government as well. The two projects that are under threat at the moment are what is called the WayOut support program and the other is the Rainbow Network. Both of those are about supporting, as I said, those rural groups. They are generally isolated workers. Some of the staff that run these groups in rural Victoria are teachers in schools and they get about 2 hours a week to look at same-sex attracted issues in huge population groups. The Rainbow Network is a statewide network and I know that every rural provider of services is part of that to make sure they are up to date and their resourced as well.

The last paper I have here is the Hume Region Youth and Sexual Diversity Strategy. Basically my recommendation or wish list is that every regional Department of Human Services for this target group has a youth sexual diversity strategy. Having these things and making them known and available sends a very clear message to this group of young people — I have not actually worked out what the affected population base would be, but this community they are living in has options for them; that Melbourne and Sydney are not the only options for them, and that there are opportunities there for them. I am not sure how long that was but there you go. I am happy to answer any questions?

The CHAIR — Thanks, Rowena, for your presentation. It touches on issues that we have not come across as yet, and they are obvious very real for a number of people.

Mr McQUILTEN — Who funds your organisation, Rowena?

Ms ALLEN — Uniting Church funds a small part of it. For our refugee work we work with the commonwealth department of immigration; with the state government Office for Youth; with neighbourhood renewal we do with in Seymour; learning employment skills, coordinating. Everything is funded that we run — leadership programs through the Department for Victorian Communities — is funded by state and local; Moira shire funds us for general youth services; or federal. The same-sex-attracted work we do is currently not funded by anyone. I did not go into that but that is one of the ongoing things. We have gone through VicHealth, the Office for Youth, the Reichstein Foundation, the Myer Foundation. It is just not picked up. Once you go through all the foundations you are back to square one.

We have about 14 different funding sources, including philanthropy, and we do a number of social enterprises working with long-term disengaged young people getting them into employment options, so we do a whole range of programs.

Mr McQUILTEN — What is your budget?

Ms ALLEN — The budget is close to \$1 million. We have three offices: Cobram, Shepparton and Seymour.

The CHAIR — Have you seen any improvement at all in the way that youth services have happened, particularly in regard to refugees and same-sex-attracted people, in rural and regional areas?

Ms ALLEN — Absolutely. We have been doing this same-sex-attracted work for 10 years, and some of the reports that I have tabled there have seen a huge increase in the number of young people who are feeling supported, like same-sex-attracted young people who are feeling supported. Clearly in the evidence they are saying they still feel more isolated than their Melbourne friends, but they are feeling like there are trickles of support now coming through school, as opposed to 10 years ago when we saw a higher rate of suicide and substance abuse. There are still issues of depression and isolation, but I do not think they are nearly as bad as they were 10 years ago. There is a lot of work still to be done, but overall it is much better. I think that has also got to do with young people's, what we call 'help-seeking' behaviour improving. They know how to look for support for themselves a bit more. I think that is improving.

For refugees, we have been doing refugee work now for about five years. Again, yes, I think we and the ethnic council were the only ones doing youth-specific or refugee work. Now, five years on, the community health service has a refugee nurse, there are schools that are picking up more of the issues, and it is becoming more mainstream; whereas there were just a few agencies doing some of the work, it is now becoming a lot more mainstream. I think there is a general understanding about refugees and skilled migration and there is going to be a huge policy push for Victoria. Sudanese families are coming with 8 to 10 young people.

We are now preparing ourselves for the second generation clash in about four years time. In Cobram, for example, we know that 46 per cent of children in primary schools are Iraqi; you project that into high schools in four to five years from now, and again the place they live between a Muslim family and a new life in Australia. So we are expecting some issues and perhaps family breakdown — hopefully not. While it is intensive now regarding post-traumatic stress, I think we are going to be looking at family connections, which is not new to the Italian experience of migration and other things we have had before, but that will be a new wave that we will hit we think in about four or five years time. We need to be vigilant about service delivery, I think.

Mr INGRAM — In the YEP document there is some interesting information. Is that available in digital format, because it is a bit hard to see the graphs.

Ms ALLEN — I believe so. I think I could get that.

Mr INGRAM — Table 1 in that document shows percentage ratings ‘excellent’, ‘good’ and ‘poor’ by respondents to youth services access in Seymour. The Department of Human Services does not come out very highly. Have you broken down the services into different areas?

Ms ALLEN — I am not responsible for this report. I would imagine the Department of Human Services does not rate highly because young people do not necessarily know what the Department of Human Services produces, and in fact they would fund just the agencies they know, like Berry Street, ourselves and other organisations. That would be my only suggestion about that.

Mr INGRAM — Similar to Lifeline?

Ms ALLEN — Yes, the telephone service.

Mr INGRAM — That is an interesting result.

Ms ALLEN — It is.

Mr INGRAM — With the same-sex young people, that would probably have more to do with their lack of desire to come out in rural areas because they are more identifiable and known throughout the community, so there would be more of a stigma in country areas because more people know each other within the community, so that would be more their own concern in trying to go away to do something like that. Would you agree?

Ms ALLEN — That is right, yes, but then there is the desire they have — they would like to live in the country, so some of them take the risk and do that. It really depends — you cannot make generalisations on that; I will try not to. But it depends on the family situation too and how much support they feel they are going to get in their own family first and then their extended family, their community and so on, and if they have found any role models — other older gay and lesbian people — where they can feel support.

Mr INGRAM — Is that something that is different in rural than metropolitan areas? I would not necessarily think the family response would be much difference whether in metropolitan areas or country areas.

Ms ALLEN — No, I would not think there would be much difference. It is more about, as you said, the stigma in the community and if you had a bad experience, there are not many places to hide. So if you came out in school and that is your one school option — say you were in Cobram, and you come out in Cobram, and that is the only school you can go to, then you are really limiting yourself. So a lot of young people tell me that they just put their head down and study; they get the university ticket and they do their exploration — or they do it on the Internet where it is completely safe. We are getting a lot more email requests for support than we ever had.

The CHAIR — We are at the end of time, Rowena, but is there one thing you would want to say to us that you think is most important that would come out of this inquiry?

Ms ALLEN — I think it is in relation to funding, that we need to keep the rural weighting on funding. All these programs do cost more to deliver. I have not mentioned that, but that would be really important — whether it is the generalist work that we do or the specifics around refugees or same-sex attraction or single parents or all the other things that we do that I have not even mentioned. The rural weighting on the service provision is really important.

The CHAIR — So that is counselling and support services?

Ms ALLEN — Pretty much — and world peace.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for that and for providing that information. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about two weeks’ time and you may correct any typos but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew.