

# 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

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#### Witnesses

Ms E. Ree, manager community services, Strathbogie Shire Council (affirmed); and

Ms K. Moran, Strathbogie Young Citizen of the Year 2006 (affirmed).

**The CHAIR** — Welcome. Thank you both for joining us today. 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, and 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 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 member. We are hearing evidence today on the inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities.

Could you please give us your full name and address and the name of the organisation you represent today as well.

**Ms REE** — My full name is Elin Ree and my address is [ADDRESS REMOVED] Euroa, 3666. I work for the Shire of Strathbogie.

**Ms MORAN** — My full name is Kaitlyn Moran. I live at [ADDRESS REMOVED] Nagambie, 3608. I am currently studying year 11 and year 12 at Euroa Secondary College.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much. Your evidence will become public in due course. Please commence your presentation and then we might have some questions for you following that.

**Ms REE** — I will start with an overview. We do not have a written presentation, so hopefully you will have questions you can ask us. I came upon this inquiry fairly late in the piece, so, due to a number of operational constraints, have not really had time to prepare anything fully in writing.

Strathbogie shire is unique — as everybody will say of their own shires, I am sure, but it is unique in its demography and location. We have no major centre in our shire. Euroa is the biggest town, with a population of 2600 plus. The total shire population is just under 10 000. We have a number of smaller towns ranging from a few families to between 200 and 300 people. Nagambie is our next biggest town, with around 1500–1600, I think.

The shire is traversed by two major freeways: one is the Hume Freeway, which runs north–south to Sydney and Melbourne, and the other one is the Goulburn Valley Highway, which goes through Nagambie. We have got some major attractions like the Strathbogie tablelands and the Nagambie waterway areas, but the shire struggles with distance and dislocation, if you like. We have got lots of small towns divided by major highways and no major centre. So that is the context for the youth of our locality. Also the projections for the next 20–30 years are that we, like a lot of other areas in Victoria, will have a rapidly ageing population. That is one of our major challenges into the future.

Strathbogie Shire Council is one of the few youth providers in the shire. We have a fairly vibrant youth program and a centre in the township of Euroa. We also attempt to bring kids from the outlying towns and areas into Euroa for activities, with some difficulty, but there is an attempt to do that. We have a small youth program in Violet Town, another unfunded and very small youth program in Nagambie and some youth activity in Avenel as well.

I know you probably do not want a whole blurb on what we do in youth services and so on, but it is probably helpful to know that it is one of the few things that provides opportunity for young people to develop even basic things like self-esteem, and to develop skills or direction apart from our schools. We have one secondary school in the shire, and that is in Euroa. Kids who live in Nagambie are bussed to five different schools outside of the shire boundaries — sorry, four outside of the shire boundaries — and one within, which is Euroa, so again you have got this difficulty of people going in all directions and trying to have a central program, if you like, that covers everybody.

Having said that, they have produced some fantastic things — things like music CDs and a very active theatre program over the last three or four years. They have produced a brochure for safe mobile phone use, and we have a regular magazine called *Vibe* which is put out twice a year. One of our young people produced this comic (**comic shown to committee**) which was launched, appropriately, last year, and they really do an amazing amount of stuff in our shire. We have no recurrent funding for any of this. It is all project based and uncertain, in a sense, into the future. That is one of the issues I will come back to.

In terms of the retention of youth in local areas, I think it might be a good idea for Katie to talk to you a little bit about her thoughts on where she sees we are at the moment in our shire, given the background that I have just described.

**Ms MORAN** — I have worked out that the main factors for young people leaving are education opportunities and to pursue a career. If they are going to university of course they cannot stay in the Strathbogie shire because we do not offer that, but also I know of a lot young people who leave the area to complete years 11 and 12 because the secondary college in Euroa cannot offer the subjects they need — not very many drama or art subjects or biology. A lot of those subjects that a lot of people are used to thinking of studying and that are the main subjects that secondary colleges usually offer just are not available because they cannot employ a teacher for the number of kids who want the subject. If you have got four kids wanting to do biology and 50 wanting psychology, then they have to take the option of psychology. So a lot of kids are moving away for education purposes, but also the amount of jobs that are offered in Euroa and the surrounding districts just is not sufficient for young people.

I see that the reason that they do not come back is because they either pursue their career and are heading towards the goal of their career and succeeding in long-term employment or they finish their studies and then a lot of them are successful in getting employed or they just enjoy the city or the life wherever they are because the country just does not offer them anything that really interests them.

I think young people these days would love to stay in their communities. I know a lot of my friends would love to stay in Euroa and stuff, but there is just nothing offered for them. The youth centre has been especially helpful, but to keep the youth centre going we need people to come into it and we need to get funding. We need to show that kids are actually going to come in and support the youth centre, but there is not enough support basically because of employment. Employment is a really big problem in Euroa and in the surrounding district. In the whole shire it is employment that is the problem.

I have thought about it, and if we held courses once a month on small things like RSA — the responsible service of alcohol — all those kinds of things, even just workplace safety or small courses like that, it would give youth recognition and qualifications and would be a great help. It is a small thing, but to have that qualification will help them get employment. There may not be a lot of employment, but the big problem with employment is that the qualifications are needed. If the qualifications are offered for the youth, I am fairly sure that it would be a lot easier to gain employment, and if more employment was coming, businesses would of course get more people coming back. That would mean more employment, the youth coming back and a busier town, and businesses would profit as well, and overall it would help the development of the town.

The main problem is trying to get the youth back; it is a big problem. I think we really need to boost training courses, education and employment. Having the youth services there would have to be a no. 1 priority. Funding is a really big problem as well. I have been working with the youth centre since I was in year 7, which has been about five years, and all the time the problem has not been getting young people there — we can get them there — but it has always been the funding, because you can only keep young people there for a certain amount of time until they think, 'Okay. Playing pool is boring' or 'Just sitting around is boring'. You need to entertain the children, and you need to take them places. By taking someone to places and showing them different cultures, they learn, but to show them different cultures and let them experience other lives you have to have funding. I know when we get funding it is great, because we go places and we experience different cultures. But coming back to the shire always gives you a great feeling. You always feel like you are back home.

If we want to bring youth back to the shire after they have done their studies, we need to offer employment. They need to still be interested in the place, not just for the quiet and no pollution, because for young people these days that is not a bother. They want things that interest them. Something has got to draw them back. If there is no employment, nothing going on, no events, nothing is going to draw them back, because the city — somewhere like Melbourne or Benalla or wherever — is more interesting because there is always something happening. They are not drawn to somewhere just by its quiet life. For them it is more that they would come back when they are older.

I love Euroa myself, but I notice my friends around me see it as more of a retirement home, a great place to settle down when you have had your life of partying and work and everything. There is nothing drawing young people back; there are no events. But it is great when we hold FReeZa events. We get so many young people in because it is a music event. There is no alcohol or drugs or anything; it is just a great time. That is what we need to do: we need to draw these young people back by holding events that interest them, showing that we can provide

employment and that young people can get together and have a great time, that they can still live their lives and pursue their goals while being in their small rural town. I think if we could get that it would be a real benefit, because we would not have to worry about city transport or rushing at peak hour and stuff. You are still in your country town, you are at home, you feel safe, you have got your employment, and you live a really happy life.

I am a former resident of Avenel. If I could have lived there my whole life, I would have, but there is just nothing that could keep me going throughout my life. If I worked in the fish-and-chip shop my whole life — but that is not the goal of a young person. These days young people have to finish year 12 and go to uni to pursue their goals, but you do not want to go to uni or finish your schooling and have nothing to show for it at the end.

I think that is what it is about these days. You want to pursue your goals, but you always need something to show for it. You do not want to get to the end of your life, and be working in a fish and chip shop or be a checkout girl at Bi-Lo, because these days, youths have a lot of dreams and people do not realise that. We have a lot of dreams and if we work our butts off at school, go all the way to year 12 and get to the end and say, 'I have nothing to show for it', it just seems a waste of time.

I notice that a lot of youths lose their passion. They end up as a checkout chick at Bi-Lo, because they just lose their passion for their dreams and everything because they have to work so hard for it, but at the end there is nothing left for them. So I think if they could do that while still living in Euroa, Nagambie or wherever they live, if you can pursue your goals or even start your career and start your life, get savings up, buy your first car but still be living in your home town, I think that would be a really marvellous feeling.

Then you can get out there, then you can go to the city or do what you want, but to live your youth in that same area but be working, earning money, getting your first car and home loan or whatever you are going to do, that would be a great feeling. It would be miraculous to have that feeling and to know that you have done it all in a small country town alone and you have been able to do that. It would just be great. I think if we can bring youth back to do that, that would be great, but we are going to need funding. We are going to need services, and we are going to need everyone to pitch in.

I think the main people who are going to have to make this happen are adults. We are going to need adults who are dedicated. But we need to get the youth into it. If you bring young people in and you get young people talking to young people, it works a lot better. If you have a 50-year-old talking to a young person, young people seem to ignore that, because they think they know. But they have not been through it. Whereas if you have a 21-year-old talking to 16-year-old about this kind of thing, it sticks in their head because they think, 'They are my age and they know what I like'.

I think what we really need to do and what would be really great is that even if we set up conferences of young people talking to young people, it gets through a lot quicker. I know that from experience. There would be a very great benefit from it. I think even starting at conferences where young people talk to young people, we would just start bringing people back. It would be the start. It is a very long journey, but if you start there, you will get it through a lot quicker. It would just grow from there. I think that will start off getting young people to rural communities.

**Mr MITCHELL** — You have scared me off all of this. I have been trying to convince my wife to move to Euroa, but now you have made me feel old. What are the main employment opportunities when living in Euroa?

**Ms MORAN** — Probably hospitality and agricultural jobs. You either get into the farming industry or construction or hospitality.

**Mr MITCHELL** — What about places like Teson Trims?

**Ms MORAN** — Teson Trims? I do not think that there are many young people who work there, but basically, it is not really a unisex job for youth, because you would not see many young girls going to work there. It is a lot easier for males to get a job in that place, but on the other hand in hospitality women seem to get jobs a lot quicker. There is not really much. There are basically male and female jobs.

**Mr MITCHELL** — There is no cross-over?

**Ms MORAN** — There is no cross-over, so basically males have the choice of construction and building, and females have hospitality. There is aged care and things like that, but I do not think many youth see that as an option because they do not see there is an option there, whereas I think a lot would enjoy it. I do not think aged care jobs and things like that are advertised much or enough to youth. It is not that the youth do not want to help. I think it is just the fact that they do not know it is there.

**Ms REE** — Yes, and the major employer in the shire is Teson Trims, along with the hospitality and aged care areas. I guess aged care is not necessarily appealing. It is not necessarily easy to sell aged care to young people, though I think there are areas where you could do that.

**Mr MITCHELL** — Do you think it is probably finding the difference between a career and a job? Production workers say that Teson Trims is a job.

**Ms REE** — It is a job and there are some young people there. There are women there. There is a certain demographic there. Most of them are probably blokes, but there is also a cohort of women who are young mothers. There is actually a cohort of single mothers in that industry. It is a job; it is not a career. They work there because they can.

**Mr MITCHELL** — With the government recently announcing equine industry stuff, is the shire going to get involved to try and get the people in the equine industry to look at bringing more young people in and getting them involved in something given it is the — sort of — jewel of the shire of Strathbogie?

**Ms REE** — Yes, it is. The shire council has an economic development manager who is working with the traders and business community. I am not quite sure what their strategy looks like in terms of youth. I would imagine they would have some component in it, but I have not actually sighted the documents and am not quite sure. I have not heard anything about any major initiative in that area. I suspect it is not a major part of the strategy. But I will certainly check that out.

**The CHAIR** — Elin and Katie, we could probably ask a lot more questions, but we are running out of time. Thank you very much for coming along and talking to us about your experiences and for supporting Katie. Thank you as well, Katie, for especially coming along today, because I am sure you would not have been able to do it on your own, and we are really happy you could present to us.

**Ms REE** — This has provided an opportunity which in fact is not normally provided in our community. It is really fantastic that we have been able to come here. There was another young woman who was to be with us today, but she was unwell and not able to come. You talked about recommendations. Are you interested in them?

**The CHAIR** — Yes, we have public submissions as well. So you could most certainly provide a written submission with ideas. In the end, we have to write a report with recommendations to government. It can be to all levels of government. Hopefully the reports will have case studies of towns that are succeeding, which will hopefully give people ideas across the state.

**Ms MORAN** — Thank you very much.

**Witnesses withdrew.**