

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

Witnesses

Ms S. M. Lord, project officer, North East TRACKS Local Learning and Employment Network, Benalla (affirmed);

Ms G. Stawiarski, chief executive officer, North East Support and Action for Youth (sworn);

Ms J. Archbold, Benalla Youth Service Providers Network (sworn); and

Mr D. Irving, (sworn); and

Mr A. Foster, (sworn), youth services, Wodonga City Council.

The CHAIR — 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 hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, including an Independent. We are conducting an inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities.

Would you provide your full name and address and, if you are representing an organisation, the name of that organisation and your position in that?

Mr IRVING — David Irving, City of Wodonga youth services.

Ms LORD — Stacey Maree Lord. I work at North East TRACKS Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) here in Benalla.

Ms STAWIARSKI — Glenyis Stawiarski. I am the chief executive officer of the North East Support and Action for Youth.

Ms ARCHBOLD — I am Jane Archbold. I am youth services coordinator at Benalla rural city and Mansfield shire and I am also a part-time careers coordinator at Benalla College.

Mr FOSTER — My name is Alan Foster. I have two roles today. One is as convenor of the North East Regional Youth Affairs Network, of which we are all a part. I am also the team leader of youth services for the City of Wodonga.

The CHAIR — Your evidence will be recorded and become public in due course. If you would provide us with a presentation, after that we will have some questions for you.

Mr FOSTER — I get to start. Thanks for the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon. As I just mentioned, we are all members of the North East Regional Youth Affairs Network, which is a network of regional youth service providers that come together and help to advise the Office for Youth and sometimes the minister for youth about youth issues. We are members of a collective group of youth agencies that are very proactive in this part of the region and we cover seven local government areas. That gives a little bit of background.

My role today is to talk a little bit about the effect on the city of Wodonga of the young people who are moving from or staying in Wodonga. We are going to present as a team and go through steps, so if you just bear with us as we do that. One of the things to acknowledge also is that we have five young people on the committee of the North East Regional Youth Affairs Network, which is very rare for a regional youth affairs network (RYAN). David is one of those and Lisa, who is absent today because she is sick, is another; she was very upset that she could not come. We have a great voice of young people on that committee. I will hand over to Jane, who is going to talk a little bit about local employment.

Ms ARCHBOLD — I want to make reference to your terms of reference, if I could and, like Alan, would like to thank you for the opportunity to be speaking here and congratulate you on the fact that you are hearing people's voices and taking on this inquiry. This issue is certainly very dear to us all.

After flattering you, we were just a little bit concerned that perhaps your terms of reference are a little narrow in that we do not think it is necessarily all about retaining young people in rural communities. It is about attracting back to rural communities young people who might have lived here or young people who live in metropolitan areas and choose to make that lifestyle choice of coming back. We think that is really important. To be viable and sustainable, any community needs to have young people. They do not necessarily need to be home grown.

Although as a parent of children I know that it is always nice to think that your kids might decide to stay around, young people need to spread their wings — again and again they tell us that they need to go out and do other things. As you have mentioned, of course we need to look at factors that might influence them to come back — but we need to open that up, to attract other young people as well.

Mr INGRAM — We will pass that on to the Premier.

Ms ARCHBOLD — My job is to give a little bit of a perspective on employment. We have divvied this up, as you have perhaps seen. We want to look at all facets of it because, although we all have things we could say individually about our own communities, we want to look at it from a RYAN perspective and give you a little bit about employment, education, welfare issues and then social connection to community — so we are trying to have a very general view.

When looking at employment, as you are probably well aware, the main employment around this part of the world is in manufacturing, retail, agriculture, community services, hospitality and education. They are the key ones. We did actually get some figures. We have done quite a lot of research through the local learning and employment network as well as other organisations.

For example, when we asked for the figures of how many young people are employed by one of our big employers in Benalla — and I give this as just a bit of a case study — they told us that 6 per cent of their work force are young people under 25. I give that as an example because this is an employer that actively recruits young people. They not only have a number of trainees; they also offer graduate incentive programs and subsidised rental. I am very fearful in that if that is an employer that is doing all those things, where does that leave so many other employers? That is really quite tragic. That employer has 275 employees, with people ranging from professionals right down to entry level qualifications, so that is a really grim picture.

I guess our concerns are that there is a lack of employment options in local areas. We have a significant ageing work force. Statistics show us that 41 per cent of the work force across our region is over 45. In the example of the local employer I gave, 63 per cent are actually over 46. There are difficulties attracting young people to certain positions and certainly manufacturing is one of those. There is also a lack of preparedness on the part of many employers to take on young people. Often there is a little bit of misunderstanding about youth culture and where young people are.

There is also an inability to offer positions to young people beyond one-year traineeships. I know that David is an example of that and will speak of that because that affects him personally. There are limited opportunities to offer incentives through scholarship programs too. There are some fantastic examples of where that works very well, but I think that it would be good if we could expand those a little bit more. We have high unemployment levels up here. The figure for young people who have not completed year 12 is as high as 20 per cent. But also on the other foot — and I say this as a teacher within a school too — we encourage young people to stay to year 12, but in fact there is a lot of disillusionment for those young people who complete year 12 and make conscious decisions to stay in their communities, and we do not have the jobs for them. We have lots of those, and I think it is really tragic when they have made that decision after having done everything that we have said is the right thing.

We also find that young people are over-represented in industry where there is part-time and casual employment — for example, in the retail and hospitality areas. They are over-represented, and of course there are few apprenticeships at the local level. I say that because there are dwindling numbers of qualified tradespeople, and we all know how frustrating it is to try and get a tradesperson to come to do the things we need done.

We also feel that we need to better match. Our communities have some good VET-in-schools programs, and other institutions have some fantastic VET programs, but it seems that they are not necessarily reflecting skill-shortage areas and local opportunities. So in some ways our schools are skilling-up young people to leave anyway, because they are not matching them with opportunities. Significant gaps are reported by employers between skills required and the skills of people who are in employment, and that needs to reflect back from schools too.

Another issue is that the Youth Employment Scheme, which is a state government scheme, is currently only available to government departments. I think it has recently been extended to local government, but it is not available to non-government agencies, and that is very difficult, because they do not get the same incentives to employ young people.

We have consulted quite extensively in order to present some things to you. When we were speaking with some young people just recently, one young woman said that a number of people she knew — tertiary students — —

You would be aware that lots of tertiary courses now encourage young people to do placements in rural communities, which we think is fantastic, but we feel that they are not necessarily supporting those. Young people often have a very negative experience because it costs them a lot of money to come up here, there is not much

happening and they are not very well welcomed. Instead of actually making them think it is a viable option, they are thinking, 'Yuk! Let me get out of here quick!'. I think we are missing an opportunity there.

Last week to supplement some of my thoughts I gave a quick quiz to 35 year 11 students at Benalla College where I work. I asked how many thought they might return to Benalla in either 5 or 10 years time. Only one young man said that he definitely would. I think that is tragic. Perhaps a third of those in the 5 and 10-year bracket said they were unsure. We need to look at strategies for those young people who are unsure to make them more aware of what we have to offer them. As my colleagues along the line are going to say, all of these employment options mean nothing if the social infrastructure is not there for young people to feel connected to their community.

Ms LORD — I want to talk a little bit about education. You have probably heard more than once today that young people are leaving rural areas to take up educational opportunities, often in the city. We have lots of figures from On Track, which the Victorian Department of Education and Training does every year, which show that more and more young people want to go to rural and regional areas for their education, so they go to Bendigo and Wodonga. They are choosing to stay in rural areas if they can.

I do not think it is a bad thing for young people to go off to study — if they do that, that is fine — but they do want to stay in their local areas. On Track shows that across Victoria about 18 per cent of students say the reason they are not studying is because they are waiting to get the youth allowance. They are working so that when they go to study they can get the independent rate of the youth allowance, which they need to live on. In our area — Wangaratta, Mansfield and Benalla — that number is over 44 per cent. It is hugely different. For lots of young people, the youth allowance is the difference.

Mr INGRAM — Is that because of the cost? Is that because it is impossible or near impossible for lower-income families to support students who go to university in Melbourne?

Ms LORD — Yes. For a lower-income family it is near impossible, but even for some less-than-lower-income people it is a bigger issue because there are associated costs around accommodation. Sometimes it is fear of a different place and worrying about who you know. If you can stay at home with mum and dad even for the first year of university, being able to take up that option makes a big difference. We have lots of deferrals in country areas, and they are saying that those are the top reasons. They are trying to get the Youth Allowance, because the cost is too much. And over 50 per cent say, 'I have not taken up tertiary study, even though I have the ENTER scores to do so, because I have had to leave home and I am not ready yet'.

Young people are saying, 'I want to be independent, but not that far'. It is a really big jump. I think there is a call to have some initial tertiary options offered locally. That also applies to early school leavers who do not complete year 12, or the young women Jane spoke about who did complete year 12, but who did not go off to university. Any other further education is still costly and/or not available here. Again, travel and cost are three times the state average, and young people have listed those as the reasons for them not taking up tertiary education. We have a terrific TAFE here, but the courses offered are limited. If you are 17 and cannot drive, even to get to Shepparton is a really big deal, and that is the difference between lining up to be one of the young people who do part-time casual work at the supermarket or following further education and getting into something else.

As part of the LLEN we also look after the commonwealth Local Community Partnership program at the moment, so we work in Euroa as well. Teson Trims has been mentioned. We are working with Teson Trims, and they are going to start an adopt-a-school program. From the community's point of view it is about increasing the number of young people who can get work there and having a vibrant community. From Teson Trims's point of view it is about showcasing that the company is not just about shop-floor entry-level jobs and that it is a career path.

Earlier on a young woman spoke really well. There is a perception in some communities, including ours, that employment is at entry level or you go to university, that there is no middle ground. We need something to help fill that middle ground. We have lots of young people who would like to stay for a while.

I do not want to go on about it, but I think one of the main things is having some tertiary study options here and to have further education available locally. We need to look at transport issues, and at some financial support for young people who either want to study here or in metropolitan areas. There is space to do something creative about hooking on some financial support for further study with incentives to then come back to rural areas. As we pointed out at the start, it is not necessarily about our kids coming back to our town, but young country kids coming back to the country and metropolitan kids coming to the country too.

Ms STAWIARSKI — Our agency is a youth welfare agency, and we deal with young people and their families between the ages of 10 and 25. Primarily we deal with 10-year-olds to 18-year-olds. We service six local government areas in the North East of Victoria, and we are the only youth welfare agency that supports all of those local government areas.

I am going to talk about some of the welfare issues that face our young people, especially in our communities. In the North East RYAN the largest population centre is Wodonga, which is about 80 kilometres from Wangaratta, about 110 kilometres from Benalla and about 150 kilometres from Mansfield. Our area goes up to Mt Beauty and Bright as well. Most of the communities we service are smaller communities with populations of less than 10 000 people.

Of our population of young people, at some stage between the ages of 10 and 18 some 10 per cent are getting some sort of welfare or family intervention services. The biggest issue is family breakdown. In our particular area there is no specific family relationship or family breakdown service. We employ youth workers and social workers, but they are more through specifically targeted programs — for example, you have to be homeless or disengaged from education.

One of the biggest issues we find is that there is no funding, no support or no way around having a generalist youth worker. The state government does not allow for that, and neither do the commonwealth or local government. We found that early intervention is the most important and the most effective strategy, but for all the six local government areas we work in there is not one generalist youth counsellor. If there is no early intervention, 10 per cent of all of our population of young people spiral down into marginalisation and disengagement.

Housing issues is a major one. We have no youth accommodation options in the six local government areas. We have no youth refuge, no crisis accommodation and no access to respite beds at all. Our nearest youth refuge is in Shepparton, where there are six beds. If a young, homeless person from Mt Beauty wanted to access that, it would be impossible because the meagre six beds in Shepparton are taken up with all the young people out of the Goulburn Valley.

Affordability of accommodation for young people in areas such as this is of great concern. The average rental of a one-bedroom unit is \$130 a week in these small areas, because one-bedroom and two-bedroom units are very scarce. When you are looking at a young person who has a youth allowance of \$140 a week, how are they going to access a \$130 unit, let alone live, study and eat? So spiralling into poverty is fairly quick.

We have a SAAP program — you are probably all aware of that — which is state-commonwealth jointly funded. We are the sole SAAP provider, and we are funded to provide service for 174 young people. Last year alone we serviced nearly 500 young people who presented to our agency as being either at risk of being homeless or homeless. We could house only eight of those young people in some sort of accommodation options, and five of those eight were in long-term caravan parks. To put a young person who has left school because of lack of support and family breakdown into a caravan park is not a particularly good option.

Of the 500 young people who accessed this, 30.4 per cent cited poverty as a major problem against going back to school or staying in the region. Many of these young people accessing our welfare services were looking for transportation to Albury-Wodonga, Melbourne, Geelong or Ballarat because they felt they could have access to service, they could find cheaper accommodation and certainly for their health and mental health issues there was a lot more support for them.

The biggest problem in welfare in our area is family breakdown. There is just not enough support or workers around early intervention programs. We employ approximately 28 people, which equates to about 22 effective full time. We investigated some options. It is very hard for us to attract social workers and qualified youth workers up into our region because there is no culture, the issues are too broad for them and they think it is much safer to stay in Melbourne.

We try to offer incentives but we are a not-for-profit charitable agency so it is hard. We actually investigated getting some trainees through the Youth Employment Scheme about a year ago, but even though we are a not-for-profit agency funded by government we could not access that scheme to provide support for us to train our own young people. So for me, as an employer, that is a major disincentive. We have just put on a trainee youth worker, but it will cost our agency at least \$8000 for fees and books to support that young person, so employment options are not attractive for young people or even for us as an employer.

Mr FOSTER — As you can see, we are presenting a holistic picture: we are covering education, employment and welfare. The area I want to talk about is the most important one, the young person's social network. The thing is, at the end of the day you can have employment, you can have the education, but if you do not have a social network then often that is a barrier to the young people moving to or staying in rural communities. We know from the research that social connectedness is the thing that will hold our young people in our community.

Glenyis has been talking a lot about the six local government areas. Wodonga is a little different in the sense that it has a bit more culture, given that Albury is close; and while it is different because you have to go to Albury to get that social life, it is close enough to get it. You can study in Wodonga, you can have educational options and then you can go across the border if you want to do the social stuff.

I suppose what we are saying is that social connectedness is a package deal. The social stuff is really important. You can have these other options but that social connection — events for young people, opportunities for young people to feel connected — is extremely important.

Research tells us that young people who are connected to communities do not get involved in anti-social behaviour, so young people who get involved in the citizenship stuff, who are involved in volunteering or in caring for those communities in those ways become effective citizens, and that is what social connectedness is all about: it is about helping their fellow man, making them feel they belong. Part of my role with our young people is about that, helping them feel like they are citizens, that they are part of our community, that they have a voice, they can ring up our local politicians and say something. It is all that connectedness stuff that makes them feel they really have some power in this community, and I think that is important.

Touching on an earlier point about the Youth Employment Scheme, David is on that scheme with us with local government. In about eight weeks time he will finish his training with us. We tried to go back to them to say that we have given this great opportunity to this young person, that I would love to keep him on for another 12 months because I think it would be fantastic for him; but they are not able to give us any more dollars or any more support. So we are in a position where local government has to fund that whole next level of the traineeship and they are saying cost-wise they would love to keep him on but that it is going to be very difficult for them to do it. So I think it does come down to that cost stuff. It comes down to providing opportunities that are supported.

We would not have put on a trainee if it had not been for that scheme, so that is another thing to take into consideration. It is a catalyst. It does not cover the traineeship, but it is a catalyst to get people involved; but then it is how do we keep them involved, how do we make that work. I think 12 months with David was fantastic, this will be demonstrated when you hear him speak — but I think another 12 months would really consolidate him in our local area as the networks that I am talking about would really be consolidated for him. He might move, and he might come back, but the experience package is the important thing, and I think that is relevant.

David, do you have anything you want to add before we move on to the recommendations?

Mr IRVING — Yes, it is sort of like Al was saying; he does not know where I am going to go, if I am going to go to Melbourne or I will move away or not. There are not too many options. When you get put on as a trainee for local government for 12 months and you see all these great things, you get so many opportunities that are new, you are sort of going to get a sense of not a promise but just advancements and stuff like that.

To be put on at the City of Wodonga for another 12 months would be great but unfortunately it does not look like it is going to happen. As a young person when you are on a 12-month contract and it is up in a couple of months, you start looking towards a life in Sydney or Melbourne, because that is where your future is. Young people look at cities and just think 'future'. If you are stuck in your small town for the rest of your life — there are jobs, but where are they going to go? Do you want to get up in the morning for them? What is going to make you enthusiastic about doing that?

Albury-Wodonga is growing rapidly, but right now, I think I would probably be looking towards the lights a lot more. That is basically all I have to say.

Mr FOSTER — We have come up with some recommendations that we have handed to you so you can ask us some questions.

Ms ARCHBOLD — I have listed a number of recommendations here around employment, just following on from what we have said. Certainly we feel there is a need to revisit the traineeship system which, as has been adequately explained, has been limited to that 12-months period so it can become a viable pathway for young people not just a stepping stone. I think we also need to look at an expansion of new apprenticeship opportunities, not only by promoting it to local employees because some local employers are not necessarily aware, but also by looking at increased support to young people and revisiting wages and conditions. It is terribly disillusioning for young people who have gone up to and finished year 12 to then get such poor conditions and wages.

Mr INGRAM — Do you mean actually starting the apprenticeship earlier, like an in-school based apprenticeship, so that the first couple of years on a lower wage are actually done earlier? Is that a solution?

Ms ARCHBOLD — Yes, I think so.

Ms LORD — I think it is a great solution, but I am thinking of somebody like my son who went off to university and then suddenly wanted to be an electrician and at 21 started an apprenticeship, so that is not an option for him, but seven bucks an hour is pretty tough.

Ms ARCHBOLD — But there are many good links between the school-based new apprenticeship program. We have had good examples locally of that working really well where it has provided good pathways for young people, so that is another option, too.

Mr INGRAM — On that as well, there seems to be a reluctance by some employers to put apprentices on because there is not necessarily the same return to the employer from the apprenticeship. Historically an apprentice would stay on and continue with that employer and return the income a couple of years after the apprenticeship had finished. Nowadays, quite often they are poached by people who are not putting apprentices on who can afford to pay higher wages, so is that something you think needs to be considered as well?

Ms ARCHBOLD — But I think also — and these would be my thoughts after talking to lots of young people — that often they leave because there is not that social infrastructure here too. They have done their apprenticeship and, as DJ said, the big-city lights and the opportunities that they have got elsewhere tend to detract.

Mr INGRAM — Whilst we also have to reward the apprentice, do we have to also reward the employer to make sure they are putting the apprentice on?

Ms ARCHBOLD — Yes.

Mr FOSTER — I think it is also about the connection that employer has with that apprentice as well. I think that is also about: how do we train our employers about how to work with young people? This generation of young people is completely different to any other generation we have had before. A lot of our employers probably do not have a lot of skill base about how even to communicate with an adolescent, let alone have one on an apprenticeship. They want them to be what they were like 20 years ago when they were doing their apprenticeship, and they are just not. So I think that is also, 'as soon as I have done this four years, I am out of here', because the relationships are not there, because they have not been developed. Yes, I think there is a need for reward but there is also a need for development maybe for the employer as well.

Ms LORD — I agree though I actually think the world has changed a little bit. I mean, it is not that long ago when the big employers like the SEC, for example, trained up a heap of apprentices and then small employers poached them. They get trained, young people, and now it is the small businesses that are training them up and they do lose them after that. They go into competition with them and set up their own business.

Ms ARCHBOLD — The third one is consider incentive schemes to help attract young people. We need to look at different ways that we can do that. That can be increasing scholarship programs; it could be subsidised rental schemes, holiday employment through scholarships as well, and that idea of local mentoring for young people at tertiary level in holidays and so forth. I think there are a number of innovative things we could do to actually attract our young people. I think we also should be helping to raise awareness of the benefits of living in rural communities as a lifestyle choice perhaps via some sort of media campaign that perhaps the state government could do. We have also thought that lobbying for tax-based incentives for young people to live and work in rural communities could be something that could be an option too. We have that in the Northern Territory and other areas. More and more this is going to become very much a crisis if we do not do something shortly.

Also, we could look at matching VET programs in schools, and through other providers, with existing skills shortages and local opportunities, and at offering mentoring support and expansion, as Glen has pointed out, of something like the YES scheme to non-government employers. As Alan was saying, we could look at developing information packages for employers, highlighting the benefits of employing young people and what that actually involves too, so that it is a bit of a development; and at outlining options and incentive programs available so that their knowledge and their practice in employing young people is improved. Lastly, perhaps look at working with schools to better prepare people for life beyond school, especially young people going on to that transition to employment. That is in relation to employment.

Ms LORD — I have lost the sheet! The ones I said before — transport for young people; getting around to get to things — here is the sheet! I think I have said them, though. Alternative education; that means other tertiary stuff offered here locally but also some alternative models. I think there are some issues with the funnel of university and that one pathway which is also a pathway for country kids out of the country. Anything else — other options in the local area and education — I think is terrific. Again, some financial support; for low-income families it is becoming not an option at all for their kids to attend university if it means moving away, and I think the people who fall into that bracket are growing. I think there are more and more people who cannot afford for their kids to do that.

Ms STAWIARSKI — Some of the recommendations around youth welfare in these smaller communities are that we should have a greater emphasis on early intervention programs, not at the tertiary-end crisis level, especially around family breakdown and school disengagement. We should be really looking proactively at some of the more successful alternative education options for marginalised young people to be able to give them opportunities for a career. Access to health services for young people: through our research, most young people have identified access to confidential and free health service is a major problem. They feel uncomfortable going to a hospital or even a community health centre. They are the most un-young-people-friendly places that you can imagine, and Mum's best friend is on reception! That is pretty hard.

We have actually piloted a program here in conjunction with two of the clinics. Two local doctors volunteered their time and we have a community health nurse and our youth agency — we have a free health clinic here but we can only afford to do it two hours once a week, and that is usually booked out. That is around personal issues, because young people have cited to me why they do leave the area — because the health services in bigger areas are much more viable.

We should have access to more emergency accommodation, and this is about social justice, about access equity and participation. Our young people in these smaller communities cannot access alternative crisis or emergency accommodation, and that is the biggest issue in the six local government areas that we work in. There is no respite and no emergency accommodation at all. Whilst we work with the families for family mediation and reconciliation, we should look at some form of greater income support for young people who, whether it is by choice or because they are forced to, live apart from their families. As I highlighted, if they have a youth allowance of \$140 and the rent is \$130, they are never going to do it. We should have more support and incentives for specific youth aid agencies such as our agency. We are the only youth welfare area, especially in the areas of specialist mental health and health and generalist youth workers. So there are some fairly strong suggestions.

Mr FOSTER — My recommendations on the social issues are — and they repeat themselves a little bit — increased funding opportunities for generalist youth work. That is a major thing that has come out of our presentation, but that is gone; the generalist youth worker who could just grab a young person in prevention before it escalates into an intervention — is gone. We need better support of local government and youth services to provide and develop initiatives and programs that connect young people to the community, which I talked about before. Connectedness is really important — that they belong, the sense that they are there, that they are part of it. We need a focus on partnership models of funding that encourage community-based solutions, not our competitive tendering stuff where everyone has to compete against each other all the time but this model where we work together, we collaborate, we work as a team to get better outcomes for our communities. I think that is really important.

There needs to be consideration of the implications of pilot project funding which often allows us to get started and away we go, the pilot gets going, then all of a sudden we rip the funding, so we need to be thinking a little bit bigger picture about some of that stuff.

We also need to consider rural issues such as transport. There is a young woman who wanted to come today but could not come because we could not get her here from Bright. So there are some of those realistic things that we face every day about getting young people to the table to represent themselves — just as a distance issue. They are willing, they wanted to be here, but we just could not get them here.

There should be encouragement of showcasing rural good practice. Often we have got all these wonderful models of city stuff, but when it comes to rural good practice models of how communities are doing really well, we do not do a good job of showcasing that stuff. There should be consideration of complications of geographical boundaries which are recognised differently by state and federal governments. I work in a perfect one of those. I work on a border, where it is, 'Sorry, you have an Albury postcode, therefore, we cannot give you a service'. I spend anywhere from six weeks to eight weeks every year developing what we call our youth card, just to find out if I ring this service, and I am a Wodonga young person, will I get a service? If they will not, then they do not go on the youth card. So you can imagine the confusion for a young person who just wants help and they ring up somewhere in Albury, and Albury goes, 'Sorry buddy, you live in Wodonga, so therefore I cannot help you'. There are some significant issues about our local and state boundaries.

There is the issue of increased funding for community transport — over and above school. If you are a school student you can get on the public school buses but if you are not, you cannot. If you want to do TAFE rather than school, then you can no longer access the bus that you used to get from your front door out in the rural community, and there are some issues with that.

Lastly, just better access to employment and education opportunities for young people. Again, it depends on where you live. Wodonga is lucky in that we have a university, but all the other local governments we represent do not, and the ones we did have have just recently pulled out. So there are some pretty big issues for us. Thank you very much for listening to us. We are happy to answer any questions, and we hope we have covered it well for you.

The CHAIR — Thank you, obviously you spent a lot of time collaborating to get this together. Thank you very much for the effort you have gone to to present to us today.

Mr McQUILTEN — Where are we going to find the money to do it?

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — We have found a lot more money in recent times, anyway. You keep talking about and I think you said you cover seven LGAs?

Mr FOSTER — Yes.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I am an ex-councillor and we did not have a youth council. Is there a youth council in your area for any of the shires or councils? And if you do not, what opportunities are there for young people to be involved in decision making either at Wodonga City Council or other shires or other organisations in the communities?

Mr FOSTER — I think it is a relevant point.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Can you give some examples?

Mr FOSTER — There are some. Wangaratta definitely has a youth council model, an elected model.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — They have a youth council too?

Mr FOSTER — Yes, they do. They certainly do. Ours is a little bit different. We do not call it a youth council but it is a youth voice for young people in Wodonga. Benalla has one; Alpine does; Towong does not; Indigo does not.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Are there youth business organisations in any of the areas?

Mr FOSTER — Yes, youth business, so it — —

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Would there be a young business group in any of the shires?

Ms ARCHBOLD — It depends on the way they are made up. Often they are made up and recruited from young people at school. Our one in Benalla, for example, we try to actually have a much broader representation than that and have young people who are not at school, because it is those young people who are often a little more disengaged, who do not actively usually choose to go down the youth council pathways.

Ms LORD — It is a good point about being on the local councils as well, though. I know that at the organisation I work for we are talking about having a young person on the committee, because that is the decision-making body and our business is education employment for young people. It is also that we need to think carefully about that so it is not one token young person who gets to sit there and be a token young person. I am arguing for some support for that so it is actually a meaningful sort of voice as well.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — The last one that Alan did — someone mentioned about how disappointing it was that an employer had outgrown his 6 per cent of young people between 18 and 25. What percentage is your council?

Mr FOSTER — Good question. I would say, under 25, probably it would be the same at 6 per cent.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — It would be lucky to be 6 per cent.

Mr FOSTER — No, we would.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Do each of the other shires have as high a percentage and what do you do to actively encourage the employing of 18 to 25-year-olds, because you should be doing it yourself. You cannot criticise anyone else unless you are doing it yourself.

Mr FOSTER — Absolutely, great point, and we are currently going down the track of exactly that at the moment, about how we sustain traineeships in our local government. I am working with our local government, our HR team about that so — —

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Not just traineeships. They do not have to be trainees.

Mr FOSTER — No, but generally that is the entrance level though. That tends to happen in local government. It tends to be a traineeship that then works you into a role. Not always with those — —

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — What is the position with young graduates?

Mr FOSTER — Yes, young graduates as well. In our team the average age tends to be quite low because we are the youth team, and obviously so, and there are four of us in that.

Mr INGRAM — In that trainee model, arguably those employees are going to end up being on the lower pay scale within the council, not necessarily the professional ones though?

Mr FOSTER — Yes and no. In our local government that is not actually the case. We had a young girl who came through on a traineeship in our admin team for 12 months and then 18 months later she was on the same level as the girls who had been there for five or six years, so she was on over \$40 000 a year, closer to \$50 000. It really does depend on the local government and how they pay and how that is set up. It is massive, from traineeship to that, but that is what happened for her. I think it depends on the local government and how it is set up. But often, I think you are right. The degree makes a difference to training, whether or not you get this pay or this pay, definitely.

Ms ARCHBOLD — There are some good examples of school-based new apprentices starting within local government and then perhaps going on into other traineeship positions and so forth too. I know that has happened to a few. Benalla has actively recruited a few young graduates and I think they actually had a young engineer who they helped when he was going through university, then he came back in return. He had holiday employment so that was a good incentive for him.

Mr INGRAM — In our area councils have moved to outsourcing just about all maintenance and construction-type jobs out of councils, which led to basically nearly zero apprenticeships in most of those types of industries. There has been a similar occurrence here. Has that left, if you like, a group of young people who would have easily filled those roles without employment?

Ms LORD — I would say yes. We do work around with employers now. It is a different world. There is a gap and those young people are not going into those apprenticeships that used to. So now the work is around talking to private employers about how they employ young people. Generally speaking they are not very good at it. They need incentives, they need knowledge about how to do it and they need to be encouraged to do it.

Ms STAWIARSKI — We actually did a survey of homeless and marginalised young people a year and a half ago. We actually surveyed not only about their homelessness but their employment, their hopes and dreams. We had males and females, and of the males, there were 43 people involved in this between the ages of 14 and 18; three of them wanted to be a motor mechanic, two trades, spray painting, computer technician, carpentry, bricklayer, electrician, graphic designer, painter and musician. They all aspired to jobs that 10 and 15 years ago were available. And the girls wanted to do hairdressing, tourism, aged care, professional writing and photography. There was no pie-in-the-sky stuff. These kids had left school early but they still aspired and were dreaming that they could get a job in these sorts of fields in their own local region, but these sorts of jobs are not advertised. If you pick up our local papers, whether it is Wangaratta, Mansfield or Bright, those jobs are not advertised because they are not there.

They actually want to do jobs like this, so in answer to your question, Craig, it is yes. There is this void now. Like someone who was talking about the State Electricity Commission and Telstra, the withdrawal of all those major employers has had a huge impact on smaller communities in employment and opportunities for young people.

Mr McQUILTEN — I would like to say thank you for you all working together. I think that is one of the things that is often missed in country Victoria. One group is over here arguing their case and their point and there is another one over there and another over there. But if you all come together there is strength in unity.

The CHAIR — Yes, thank you very much for giving us your time today and coming along. You have really helped to make our trip worthwhile today.

Mr FOSTER — Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. The information from this, will it be fed back?

The CHAIR — What will happen is this information you have given us today will go on the web.

Mr INGRAM — Your evidence has been taken down by Hansard and you will receive a copy of that so you can correct minor typographical errors, and once you have approved it it will go on the web as evidence.

The CHAIR — In due course the committee will write a report with recommendations and hopefully some case studies of what is happening in different areas and that will be freely available.

Mr FOSTER — Thanks for your time.

Ms ARCHBOLD — Thank you. Can I also encourage you that any time you wanted to further consult the North East RYAN is always very happy to offer our suggestions and opinions.

Ms STAWIARSKI — I have some papers here just around some of the welfare issues!

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.