

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Benalla — 11 April 2006

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Ms J. Hippisley, convenor, Goulburn Regional Youth Affairs Network, and executive officer, Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network (sworn).

The CHAIR — Welcome, Jennifer. I have a brief 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 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, hearing evidence today on the inquiry into retaining young people in rural areas. Could you please provide us with your full name, address and the name of the organisation you are representing today?

Ms HIPPISLEY — Jennifer Hippisley, convenor of the Goulburn Regional Youth Advisory Network is one hat. I think I am wearing the Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) hat as well, as I am its executive officer.

The CHAIR — What area do you actually cover?

Ms HIPPISLEY — With the Regional Youth Affairs Network (RYAN) it covers from Cobram and Benalla down to Murrindindi, five local government areas — Strathbogie, Shepparton, basically that area. The Goulburn Murray LLEN covers three local government areas — Shepparton, Strathbogie and Moira.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. Could you please provide us with your opening remarks, and then we will have some questions for you following that.

Ms HIPPISLEY — I have given you the paper to take away with you, and excuse me if I read some of this. We received the terms of reference paperwork, and I thought it would be a useful idea to use our electronic networks, which are quite considerable, to run a survey.

We sent out a survey electronically to young people and those people working with young people in schools, TAFE colleges, adult education centres and youth agencies. Parents, grandparents and community members were included in that. Some young people were residing in Melbourne for study or work and had a rural background, but the majority of young people who responded were living in regional Victoria and studying either at secondary school or TAFE/Adult Education Centre.

I have highlighted the questions that we put in the survey, and I have just made a few comments and summary points that I am going to talk to, but I thought the actual responses you have in the last part of the paperwork would be very useful. I think we had in excess of 110 to 120 responses.

In response to the question, 'Why would you leave the rural area you live in?' it seemed to be almost unanimously work or study, which was a very practical reason. Some responses did talk about bigger and better opportunities, trying new things, travel and lifestyle to a lesser extent, and a small number mentioned getting away from something like their family or the small town where everybody knows everybody else's business, but they were very, very much in the minority. The majority were just work or study, and that was it.

Anecdotally through the research we have done with the LLEN and RYAN, young people over the past few years have been telling us that there seems to be a lot of unspoken, almost, community pressure and expectation with them in school and their broader community and probably coming from their parents as well, by and large, that it is a good thing to spread your wings, go away, see new things and experience life. I am sure you guys have all heard that as well.

I have another quote there from a dairy farmers meeting that I attended. The dairy farmers on the one hand were complaining that they could not get any young people to work on the dairy farms, but they were not talking about their own children; of course they were not going to be working on the dairy farms. They wanted them to go away first and experience life, so it was a bit of a conflict.

Young people said to me that if people ask you what you are doing and you say you are not going to go away, you want to stay here, it is almost like it is seen as a bit of a negative thing, that they feel they must be a bit of a dud. It is that kind of community perception that probably needs addressing, and we are addressing it. I think it is improving but it could go a long way.

My question is, 'Is it young people's perception that their family and community would prefer them to move away?' — this is post-secondary school. I think a bit of work needs to be done there. Question 2 was, 'Why do you want to stay?'; overwhelmingly it was for their family and friends — so a very people-orientated answer. Some did talk about lifestyle and the space that you have in the country as opposed to the city. You will notice when you have time to go through it that there was quite clearly an adult response to the surveys that stands out in each question. That person cited 'habit', which to me could be a slightly derogatory reason — all the young people obviously stay because it is habit, not necessarily because they want to, but it is habit. I thought that was worth querying as well. It seemed to me a slight putdown.

Question 3 was, 'If you plan on leaving, would you come back to live; if you would, good; if not, why not?'. Once again, friends and family, employment opportunities, lifestyle and space were cited as was repeatedly 'a good place to bring up your family'.

Mr INGRAM — Jennifer, I have been going through the answers. There appear to be a lot of those who say yes, but I do not think that is necessarily borne out in the statistics. It appears from those responses that most young people would say they would like to come back but contingent on the job opportunities being there. That is very clear.

Ms HIPPISEY — Yes. I am agreeing with you.

Mr INGRAM — That is fine.

Ms HIPPISEY — 'What would influence you to come back and live in a rural area?' — I am just picking up some of the ones that jumped out at me — but once again it is about having a place to raise a family. Then we asked: what would it look like, this rural area? We gave a few examples. They probably did not move very much past the examples that we gave them. However, the things that jumped out were water — perhaps coming out of a drought that is not surprising, but they talked about rivers, lakes, beach and presumably water sports and that kind of thing, that I am extrapolating — restaurants and good transport. The key attractants that jumped out at me were safety, space and the cost of housing being better than metropolitan.

My observation there is that:

Young people talk about the importance of friends and family, and we know that they see schools (until they leave) as a centre point or hub of the community, presumably where they learn new things, feel safe and connected to their community (family and friends) and the wider community. Transport is largely not a problem with school buses at least —

and I am sure you have heard over and over again, although it has not come out so much in this survey, that for young people transport is the big issue —

and there are plenty of opportunities to participate in numerous sports, activities, community groups, school councils —

and what not, for that age group.

It seems to me that it is the transition period when they leave school and they are about to launch or go into further study or employment that there is a gap in the system — by that I mean in the support for young people. I am wondering whether rural communities inadvertently encourage young people to leave — and then, of course, we complain when they do. Do we have enough opportunities and facilities in place in regional Victoria for this particular age group?

My observation goes on:

Young people say they want to come back to raise their own families, but it is dependent on work — and feeling connected to the community. It may be that we have been creating a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Young people say they want more opportunities in the arts, in leisure activities, good affordable housing, transport options, good salaries — in fact they want no less than their metropolitan counterparts.

There is a quote there:

This is ridiculous. Some country people are creative, worldly, interesting people in just the same way as the stereotypical city dweller.

I know that I am preaching to the converted with you guys, but it is interesting that they feel so strongly about that.

After the questions, there are some other responses from people who were thinking about it and wanted to email a bit more information and thoughts. The last couple of pages are about that. The employer who is responding talks about not necessarily wanting the same people who have grown up in the country. That is not the priority; it is more about getting the right fit and the right mix and the right age groups. They might not be the same people.

I have not followed through on some of those articles on the generation Y concept and young people staying at home a lot longer — and I can vouch for that, having four of mine at home — and whether it is actually true that people are leaving regional Victoria as much as we think they are.

Mr INGRAM — Jennifer, just on what you have presented, on page 18 you have ‘Other comments from the survey’ and a quote from the terms of reference, that this is an inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities. Your comment is that the assumption behind that is:

... that the retention of young people in the community is, by definition, the top goal. I would like to question this.

I would like you to put that in your own words.

Ms HIPPISEY — This is by somebody responding, and the rest of it is over the page. They question that retaining John and Betty — —

Mr INGRAM — I was just questioning whether they are your comments or someone else’s.

Ms HIPPISEY — No, that is straight from a response that somebody has sent me — a really long response that goes down to nearly the bottom of the page. That is more about the employment needs. That particular person has a high-tech manufacturing/export business. Then there is the next response, no. 2, and that is it.

The CHAIR — Thank you for going to all that effort for us.

Ms HIPPISEY — That is all right. I just hope it is useful.

The CHAIR — I am sure it will be. From that information, what recommendations would you like to see come out of the inquiry that would assist with attracting young people back to rural Victoria or even, in the case of one of your responses, attracting to rural Victoria new young people with the right skill set and retaining young people? What things do you see that government and communities can do to ensure that we do have that balance, with that mix of young people in our towns?

Ms HIPPISEY — I think we have to invest in that age-group gap. There is a lot of support for young people while they are in the secondary education system and less so, in my experience and I think in the experience of those people, once they step out that door. In a different kind of context but very relevant, in a forum we had recently young people said to us that it seems obvious that the schools should become more like a community hub for them and places that they can go back to. At the moment in a lot of cases once they leave, that is it — there is not any expectation that they will go back, and in fact some of them are actively discouraged from doing that. They would like to see that as sort of flowering out to be much more of a community resource for them.

I think we need to look at the places where young people go for education, if they are in regional Victoria — I guess Bendigo is a good example — and see what sorts of facilities are in place there that make them attractive. Obviously Bendigo is a bit of a university town, so a lot of things grow up around that, but they are the same sorts of things that young people find in Carlton and North Fitzroy. That is where they like to live, because it is kind of exciting and there are lots of cafes and lots of things to do. It is not about just sport, although sport is important; it is about the arts, music, the cafe life and all that sort of thing. I think as communities we probably need to address that as well, in the larger centres particularly. I would like to see more opportunities for people in that age group who are not involved so much in sport but in the other areas, for them to participate.

I think a lot of work could be done relatively easily with a good campaign around changing perceptions in the community and also outside perceptions of what it is like to live in regional Victoria, but from a young person’s point of view. We have had those campaigns, and there is a strategy in place at the moment.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — We have still got them, in Make it Happen in Provincial Victoria.

Ms HIPPISELY — But does it focus on youth?

The CHAIR — Not on youth; you are right.

Ms HIPPISELY — I was listening before and heard the talk around mentoring and that sort of thing. Clearly that or something like that needs to happen. There seems to be a gap there. You do not have the helping hand, helping the young people to build their networks. Some of them might be able to do that on their own, but by and large they need a little bit of a hand with that, I think. Some sort of systemic strategy in place to support that would be useful. It has come up over and over again in a lot of work. It is still the point in time when they leave school and lose that systemic support that is the time when they potentially either leave, do not know what to do or fall through the gaps, in my experience.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your submission. You will receive a copy of the transcript in a few weeks, and you may correct typographical errors but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew.