

# 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

Mr W. H. Weaire, chairman (sworn); and

Ms B. K. Alexander, executive officer, Tomorrow: Today Foundation (sworn).

**The CHAIR** — I welcome Mr Weaire and Ms Alexander to the Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee. Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act this committee is empowered to take all evidence under oath or affirmation. I wish to advise that all evidence and submissions taken by this committee is taken under powers conferred on it by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act granted immunity from judicial review, but anything said outside the hearings of the committee is not protected by parliamentary privilege. This is an all-party parliamentary committee including an Independent member which is inquiring today into retaining young people in rural towns and communities.

Please state your full name and address and the name of the organisation you are representing.

**Mr WEAIRE** — Wayne Harold Weaire, [ADDRESS REMOVED] Warrenbayne. I am chairman of the Tomorrow: Today Foundation.

**Ms ALEXANDER** — Barbara Kaye Alexander, [ADDRESS REMOVED] Benalla. I am the Executive Officer, Tomorrow: Today Foundation.

**The CHAIR** — Your evidence will be taken down and will become public evidence in due course. If you could please provide us with your opening remarks and then committee members will have some questions for you following that.

**Mr WEAIRE** — Thank you for the opportunity. It certainly is a great invitation. Tomorrow: Today Foundation is one of the fledgling community foundations originally established with the support of the Myer Foundation and the commonwealth government. It is very much part of the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal. There are a number of community foundations around Australia and indeed throughout the world. For us, when we did the feasibility study about creating a foundation here in Benalla we did the work to find out what it would mean for the fabric of community life in our rural area. What we discovered was that youth and the ability to retain youth — in fact, pushing ‘youth’ out to include the early breeders, to what we see as the 30-year-olds — was important for rural communities. We acknowledged that young people will need to go away for education, schooling and various activities that add to their richness of life, but at the same time we saw as a foundation that we needed to create a community that young people and the young breeders are prepared to come back to and be part of. The foundation established itself with the support of the Foundation for Regional Renewal under the belief that in order to create a strong tomorrow we need to do that by our actions today. That has really become our motto.

For us it is very much about the fabric of the community that encourages and entices young people back. I might say that my income is earned as director of the Delatite Community Health Service, and even today we are celebrating that a young person who came to work in this community and would normally work as a physiotherapist for 12 months and go off overseas has come to us for six months leave of absence so she can go off and do the stuff people want to do. She is a Melbourne girl herself, but she is so impressed by the fabric and richness of community life that we have around Benalla that her aim is to come back and buy her first house in this area. It is important to have an organisation that is prepared to support that type of scenario. That is an example of the type of richness of community life that we certainly strive for.

The Tomorrow: Today Foundation is certainly aware of the many different ideas that add to the richness of the experience of community life that so often cannot be realised because of the lack of funding, often seeding funding, to get it up and going. Barbara will talk about many of the activities over the last four years that we have been able to support that have enhanced that richness of community life. Our aim is to put together an investment portfolio of some millions of dollars that in the long term will provide the small seeding funding that these community projects often need to add to that quality of life in rural areas without having to go to government or to much larger private philanthropy.

That is Tomorrow: Today. It is headed by a group of directors all of whom have significant roles, both very visible and simply very quiet, in the community who continue through our small grants program and our very quiet sponsorship — sometimes we support other agencies to apply for money that add to the richness of community life. We are very much a foundation that is about providing advocacy and support to the disadvantaged, because we have the contacts. Certainly the disadvantaged in terms of disability and in terms of issues around same-sex attracted young people and people who enter the arts or some of the other expressions of young people and young adult life that often require them to go away to other centres. Through advocacy, support and bringing together

communities of interest we find that we can often create that experience in a rural sector that means, yes, a young person will still go away to gain the experience of life but will come back again and be able to experience that part of their life and help enrich the fabric of our community.

Enough from me in terms of a general introduction, but Barbara will speak more about the hands-on work we have been doing.

**Ms ALEXANDER** — Two of the aims of the Tomorrow: Today Foundation are to provide a mechanism for resourcing community development initiatives and to attract and retain young adults in the Benalla district. To inform our community development projects we have done a few surveys with young people. Of the 15 to 18-year-olds, many of those surveyed believe individually that there is nothing for them to do in this town. They have requested facilities such as their own space to play music, hang out and talk with their friends. They have told us this town is for old people. Because of their sense of not being catered for, they cannot wait to leave. Young people who belong to a group or a club, we found, are more positive about their community, because they have a sense of belonging. They did not believe there was nothing to do but still felt there should be more specific entertainment for them to participate in.

The 0 to 18 demographic of Benalla is the biggest part of our population and receives the least social planning and funding. Young people tell us there used to be much more entertainment in our country town than there is now. Benalla used to have a picture theatre, a drive-in and Blue Light discos on a regular basis. We now have no cinema at all. We have occasional FReeZA gigs, which are very, very popular but are only funded four times a year. This age group needs to have Benalla-based entertainment, because transport to other towns is virtually non-existent, and transport in rural areas, as you will all know, is a big problem.

Tomorrow: Today Foundation has actively participated in the working group to have the space for young people and have been involved in lobbying for the local drill hall to be a multi-use site for access for young people so they have their own space, et cetera. Tomorrow: Today Foundation is a member of the Benalla Youth Providers Network and currently acts as chair at meetings.

This network, with a small amount of funding, ran a project called Creating Community Connections, with interaction between young people at school and older community members, who put up displays on local group activities, such as Rotary, the CWA, the croquet club, the china painting and the Red Cross. The croquet club was very popular.

Students armed with a trivia sheet talked to members of the groups to find out the answers to questions in order to win a prize. We also had a young inspirational speaker for the young people. Young people provided the entertainment during the day. There was a very positive buzz in the hall on the day and very good interaction between the old and the young. It broke down some of the barriers — a lot of older people are scared of younger people. We would love to do that again, but like I said, we had a small amount of funding to do it once, and it has not happened again. But we would like to do it every so often.

Tomorrow: Today Foundation mentored a young person completing a TAFE course in community services. We did a 10-week, 1-day-a-week mentoring and placement of a young person, and we had great success. That person went on to get a permanent position somewhere else. However, other attempts have failed due to lack of commitment and support, sometimes from TAFE, sometimes from support groups that help at school et cetera. On-the-job mentoring, traineeships and other approaches to employment and education need to be supported.

The older age group, 19 to 34, in Benalla includes quite a few newcomers to our town, some of whom are first-year occupational therapists, speech therapists, vets, solicitors et cetera, and there are other visiting professionals, such as engineers and DSE employees. They told us that because of lack of opportunities to meet other young professionals they are isolated. We have asked these young people to tell us about their experiences of mixing in and becoming part of the community where they live. For most of them it seems it was very difficult, and most said they went to work, saw their work colleagues, did their work and went home, and they did not see or talk to anybody else. Therefore they could not wait until their time was up and they could leave.

A Tomorrow: Today Foundation initiative was to host several Benalla get-togethers for young business people and professionals to gather information on what would be the best way to address the social isolation. There is now a social network and there are 50 people on our email list. There have been quite a few social get-togethers at different venues, and it is early days and we are still looking at different ways of making it work.

Tomorrow: Today Foundation has supported projects specifically aimed at building a stronger community, always keeping in mind attracting and retaining the younger demographic. We have a small annual grant scheme, and some of the supported projects have been a bike club, where older members of the community work with younger members of the community — they are often the disadvantaged — and police to put bikes together and keep them off the streets. They ride their bikes, and the teenagers up the street are fixing the bikes. That is one thing that we do.

We have supported a Benalla community choir, which anyone can join; it does not matter if you can sing or not. Those who can sing loud, and they hide the ones who cannot. It has been very successful. About 50 to 60 people have attended that; it has been very successful. It is something very simple, but it creates a nicer community. The Benalla Business Network provides education to young business owners on various aspects of building a network of support. We have a lot of young businesspeople in town who really do not get much support from the older business community, and this is something that we have helped set up. It provides some education for them and helps them to bond together et cetera.

The *Pulse* newspaper was the outcome of extensive research where young people said they wanted their own newspaper. There is also a Benalla artists' cooperative. This project is aimed to explore the concept of an artists' cooperative which supports artists and promotes Benalla as an artistic entity. There are many talented young people within our community who participate in artistic pursuits, but funding to get this off the ground, with rented premises and everything else, is just about impossible. Yet there is lots of money for sport.

'Oh, to be able to call Benalla home' was a project we did for new people coming into the community and finding it hard to mix in. We did this with Benalla Rural City Council. We helped people access the swimming pool. Would you believe that a lot of people never go near the swimming pool; they are intimidated by the swimming pool. So we did a support program that took them in, and we had fun days at the swimming pool with exercise classes and everything else.

We also took them to the local bowling club and taught them how to play bowls and introduced them to the people who are at the bowling club and tried to integrate them into the community. There is also the Young Mums and Young Mums-To-Be Support Group, which is a support and friendship group for young mums and young mums-to-be in the Benalla area. The group is active in presenting a more positive image of teenage mums locally. This was an initiative of a very positive young mum who, as a leader, encouraged others to join. She helped others stay at school or get jobs. We helped support her in doing that. They are some of the projects we have done over the years, and there are a lot more.

**The CHAIR** — Fantastic. With the young professionals and business people, I spoke to somebody else, I think it was a reporter in Bendigo or Mildura — Bendigo it was — who was telling me about her experiences in that town and how that has helped make her life more interesting in country Victoria. Have you done much research since doing that about those people's attitudes to staying in Benalla now that they have access to other people in the community who might be more like-minded?

**Ms ALEXANDER** — Yes. We started this probably in about June last year, and the idea is to do an evaluation of it after a certain period of time. We find that with young people, although they want all these things, sometimes it is hard to find a leader.

**The CHAIR** — Yes.

**Ms ALEXANDER** — And a driver. That has been our focus. We think we have four now who are willing to be the people who the others can relate to and talk to. We will therefore get some different ideas from them, because they have to run it, and it has to be things that they, not older people, like. Yes, we plan to evaluate it, probably in June or July, to see the benefits. A lot of subgroups have set up out of it; it has been amazing that people have found like-minded people they can relate to and have set up little subgroups and done things. That is fine, because that is what it is all about; they did not know anyone before. That has been very worthwhile.

**Mr INGRAM** — I do not know who is best to answer this question. Whereabouts is the money invested that you have invested as part of the foundation?

**Mr WEAIRE** — We do not have very much money at all at the moment. The dream is for millions of dollars; I think we have about \$15 000 of investments at the moment. Bendigo Bank has that, because it has been

supporting the Foundation for Regional and Rural Renewal, and it has given us a pretty good deal. We went with a local cooperative before that. But ultimately, once the money starts to pour in, it is a whole strategy. We use accountants and solicitors in Melbourne, some of the bigger offices in Melbourne, to be our advisers for that.

**Mr INGRAM** — One of the reasons money has poured out of country areas is compulsory superannuation. Businesses which would normally reinvest money back into their businesses now have an obligation to invest in superannuation funds, which predominantly invest in large businesses in metropolitan areas, which means that money pours out of country areas. Do you want to comment on that?

**Mr WEAIRE** — If there is a way that that money could have that multiplier effect by being invested in rural communities and through rural scenarios, then obviously there is an enormous amount of money that can —

The whole multiplier effect of that type of resource could be used. But the idea is in the back of the head, thank you very much.

**Mr INGRAM** — But it is a challenge to an organisation like yours with a goal to invest large amounts of money.

**Mr WEAIRE** — Yes, of course it is.

**Ms ALEXANDER** — Yes.

**Mr INGRAM** — If that money is then invested in metropolitan areas, it is actually undermining the very thing that you are attempting to achieve.

**Mr WEAIRE** — That is right; indeed.

**Ms ALEXANDER** — That is exactly right, yes.

**Mr MITCHELL** — You mentioned the picture theatre and drive-ins and things. What sorts of services do young ones want in the community?

**Ms ALEXANDER** — Really, when you ask them, they just want a place to hang out. It is just amazing. Because once they do hang out in numbers, then they are sort of vandals — everyone else is intimidated. We have a big problem here. The kids are usually great, but there is no place for them to go. There is absolutely hardly anything now. If you are out on a farm or something, you might have something to do, but if you are in town —

**Mr WEAIRE** — I think part of the issue that certainly we see in some of our work in research is that the nature of society has changed because of dual income families and increasing numbers of single-parent families by choice rather than by default, that the ability for a sense of belonging, a sense of integration across generations — I am involved privately with a number of organisations where parents are very much involved, and to have 100 or 150 people both young, very young, and the parents all involved creates an incredible community.

But that comes at a huge cost in terms of time and so part of one of our struggles for Tomorrow: Today is how you create that type of opportunity in the community where people have a sense cross-generationally to be involved, to be supported, where young people have more mentors than just their immediate parent or caregiver. That is a whole area of work that I think we are just beginning to realise about how we create that.

When we look at the really successful sporting clubs, they are the ones where the parents are involved with the kids. The one I am thinking of is the local pony club. There are 170 of us with kids and adults all involved in that. There is that sense that the parents do not want to miss it and so the kids get supported and encouraged. Some of the arts groups that are starting to start up around the schools — they come out of the schools — again there is an intergenerational sense of belonging rather than the young people being left to say, 'Where do I fit? Who wants to own me as it is? Who wants to care for me?' Because when we do run those events where young people are included and supported and seen as valuable, the spin-off from that is enormous.

**Ms ALEXANDER** — I would say that the demographic of Benalla has changed a lot. We have to learn how to cater for a different type of person in our community. Many of those people you would not find out the pony club and you would probably not even find them at the football club and now those people are forming a

bigger part of our community and we have to look at things differently. Government has sent a lot of people to country centres because we have big ministry of housing areas but they have not added the supports for the programs. Sometimes it is not even money, just people on the ground to help facilitate them integrating into our community. People are just plonked in areas, and it just does not happen in Benalla; it happens everywhere.

**Mr MITCHELL** — Are young people encouraged to apply for these things or to advocate the new services and that?

**Ms ALEXANDER** — Yes, they are. I just did something this morning with a whole lot of the VCAL students. You know VCAL is a different way of doing your VCE and there were 15 young people there who were asked what was the project they wanted to do that would make Benalla better place for their VCE or their VCAL certificate. So they are asked but it all depends what sort of background they come from, whether they have got the insight into what is needed. So really what they could think of was putting on a social for the students at the school, which is probably a good thing because we do not have activities like that. We do not have those sorts of things. But that is all that they could come up with.

But they are asked their opinion. We have had lots of surveys on different things — the one where the newspaper came up number 1, the picture theatre came up number 2.

**Mr WEAIRE** — I think it goes back to the whole money thing and investment. In our small grants per year we had far more — as you do indeed in government — applications for the use of resources. What we are discovering that what we are able to do through the foundation is to engage other parts of the community. So we can put X money to start something off. We have also got the contacts that bring others — for example, the Bike Shed, a great thing for the lower socio-economic part of our community.

We were able to bring other people with some seeding money to make a great community activity start to happen that really is hitting young people's needs in the sense of belonging and being supported. Money does not fix everything, but by hell, when we get enough money here going we will have the opportunity to seed some of those things that will add to that richness of life.

**Mr MITCHELL** — Are you seeing a division in, say, the West Benalla suburbs to other parts?

**Mr WEAIRE** — A few years ago it was very, very strong — it was called the Bronx. We got some VicHealth funding back in 2002 and ran a community festival here. That was a real attempt — and a great day! — to try and meld the two together.

The schools will tell us that we did not reach the ones that we were really hoping to reach, those who were really disengaged and just did not even feel empowered to get involved. We certainly got into some of that area. But certainly what came out of that was a greater involvement by the whole community in Waminda, the community house, and even services that come out of community health now being offered at Waminda and offered within that part. So that process certainly lead to an opening up of understanding about what bridges and barriers we in fact build as infrastructure and that needed to be broken down.

**Ms ALEXANDER** — We need to do a whole lot more of that. The trouble is we get funds to do something, then that is it and you cannot carry on

**Mr MITCHELL** — Something like that has got to be an ongoing — —

**Ms ALEXANDER** — It has to be! It took 10 years for it to happen; it will not be fixed by one month's festivities. It will take time and somebody devoted to doing it.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for your submission today and giving us your time and ideas. You will receive a copy of the transcript in two weeks' time or so. You may correct any typographical errors but not matters of substance.

**Witnesses withdrew.**