

# CORRECTED VERSION

## RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Subcommittee

#### Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Alexandra— 12 April 2006

#### Members

Mr B. P. Hardman  
Mr C. Ingram

Mr J. M. McQuilten

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms L. Topic  
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#### Witness

Ms C. L. Kesterton, project worker, Alexandra, Berry Street Victoria (affirmed).

**The CHAIR** — Welcome, everybody. Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, this committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise all present at these hearings that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, granted immunity from judicial review.

I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, including an Independent, hearing evidence about retaining young people in rural towns and communities. Could you please state your full name, address, the name of the organisation you are representing and your position in that organisation.

**Ms KESTERTON** — My name is Catherine Lorna Kesterton. I live at [ADDRESS REMOVED]Thornton. Berry Street Victoria is the organisation I work for.

**The CHAIR** — Your evidence will become public evidence in due course. It will be taken down as you are talking. Please provide us with your statement and then we might have some questions for you following that.

**Ms KESTERTON** — Unfortunately Lisa Rudd could not be here today, so I am going to be presenting her information as well. I am going to talk about two of the specific Berry Street projects and then the general aspects will be covered later by our regional manager and local manager.

The first project I want to talk about is the Alexandra Real Connections and STEP Ahead programs, which are the Youth Futures projects. These projects were implemented to address some of the following issues — and many of these issues influence the retention or loss of young people from our rural area and include: the lack of local training pathways for young people; the limit of local employment pathways; no realistic public transport to any other training providers or employment opportunities; limited community ownership of the issue of youth futures — many people actually wanted to help, but did not know how they could.

Also, there is only one secondary school in each cluster, so there is a lack of alternative schools if things do not work out and if the needs of one student are not met by a particular school; there are negative community perceptions of some young people, stereotyping and that sort of thing — in a small community these stereotypes stick especially strongly and behaviours can become more entrenched with that labelling; students have little knowledge of what employment and training options existed in the local area — they had little knowledge about local industry and businesses here; there are also limited employment opportunities for young people returning after study, training, travel or whatever elsewhere; and families would leave the area to give their kids more options.

So what we did for the Real Connections project and the STEP Ahead project was that we had a project worker employed, we had a partnership with both schools, Yea High School and Alexandra Secondary College. There is a school-based coordinator employed as well. We engaged local stakeholders to set up working parties. We adapted and implemented elements of the Beacon Foundation's No Dole program, we engaged employers and the broader community through business breakfasts and specific activities, like a mock interviews, guest career speeches and things like that.

The whole curriculum at year 10 at Alexandra Secondary College was overhauled. We introduced a unit called work skills, which is a compulsory unit across year 10 — all the kids do it. It is aimed at being real and relevant to young people's futures and engaging. Through that unit this year, all the kids are enrolled in a certificate 1 career based through the institution CEACA. That is in vocational preparation and is a nationally recognised accreditation.

We are introducing an annual pledge event. We have run three in Alexandra and one in Yea. The pledge event is where students take a pledge to commit themselves to positive future choices, those being study, employment or training for the following year. The pledge states:

I willingly commit myself to the Alexandra Real Connections set the direction pledge, which aims to have all year 10 students engaged in further study, employment or training by March 31, 2007.

Obviously the Yea pledge is relevant to Yea. We have also run urban camps, local industry visits, mock interviews in partnership with local Lions clubs and Rotary clubs. In Alexandra, we run a Career Linx Mentoring program.

Regarding the outcomes so far of these elements of the program, we have few statistical figures. We are still working out the best way to evaluate the outcomes of the program, but some of the figures so far are: we have had

a 96 percentage success rate from the ARC from 2004 year 10s; we have had a 99 per cent success rate from the art pledge from the year 10s of 2005. What that means is that 96 and 99 per cent of those students respectively were engaged in study, employment or training by March the following year.

We have had over 150 community members volunteering in pathways activities with young people. So we have actually given the adults that wanted to contribute a way to make a difference. The social capital of these adults has been tapped, been used to create links with young people and have provided a valuable resource and opportunity for those young people. We have utilised those people in mock interviews and as mentors. They have attended various ceremonies, events and those sort of things, as well as guest presentations to the work skills classes.

We also had success and positive outcomes with the Career Linx Mentoring program. One of the things that has happened for one student is that he has been able to set up work placements and work experience. He was a previously disengaged kid. Not only has he just got any old work placements, but he has been attending distinguished venues like Stonelea and Eildon Boat Club. His self-esteem has risen through that as well. I have a quote from one of the mentors of the program:

When we first met, he had no social skills at all. His school contemporaries teased him continually, because they thought him odd, and then he would lose his temper ... Now he shakes hands when we meet ... and his temper is no longer a problem. I have been fortunate to establish a very sound relationship with him.

There are obviously benefits in the program for the mentors as well, which is great. The police and community consultative committee has reported a reduction in the incidence of teenage vandalism in recent years. There is no way of knowing whether our program has influenced those figures, but it is good to hear.

We have established connections with businesses and employers, to create opportunities for employment and training for young people who are returning to the area. We have also had local industry visits that have helped to raise the awareness of local opportunities, so that the young people had no idea of what the Outdoor Education Group was — it is one of the major employers in our area — and what range of jobs were there.

They visited the OEG and had presentations by the staff there and so now they are more aware of the job opportunities that exist there. Similarly with Gould's Mill, which is another big employer in the area, students' perceptions of that were that it was basically a place you went to if you could not get a job somewhere else and it was all unskilled labour. A couple of visits out to the mill have shown them what range of jobs are there and the pathways that might lead them there.

There is some tracking data on one of the handouts that is about where the Alexandra year 10 kids from 2004 to 2005 and 2005 to 2006 have gone and 2005 for Yea.

The youth arts project for both Alexandra and Yea were also set up to address a number of issues, some of which influence retention or loss of young people in the area. They include lack of non-sporting recreational opportunities for young people in our local area, which was identified in a scoping study undertaken in 2000 by Berry Street Victoria. There are minimal opportunities for young people to participate in community life or to make connections with others outside school or sport.

There are few opportunities for the broader community to see young people's positive contribution to community life, especially in creative areas. Young people without recreational opportunities suffer negative community perceptions, and they are seen as just hanging out, being lazy, up to mischief and being non-achievers. There is a lack of transport, so they cannot get to events and activities even if they are at a nearby town within the shire, unless their parents or somebody else drives them there. There is a common aspiration among young people to just leave town as soon as they can, because there is nothing to do here. Families leave the area to provide broader recreational opportunities for the young people.

What we did through the youth arts project based in Alexandra and Yea was employ a project worker through Berry Street. Working parties with community members were established. We developed connections with a lot of local community groups, so we drew on the strengths that were already there and tried to support them to do what they were doing.

Some of the connections we have are with the local skate park and youth precinct group, the Alexandra show committee, local Lions and Rotary clubs, Regional Arts Victoria and the Murrindindi shire. We ran a lot of

activities, festivals and community events. We developed partnerships and applied for funding to run activities and events.

Berry Street Victoria provided the incorporated body which is necessary to get funding. It is very hard for some of the smaller groups to access funding if they are not incorporated. Some of the funding we have secured has been through our local shire and Regional Arts Victoria, for the art and environment and Murrindindi murals projects and the National Youth Week celebrations in Yea. We are also linked in with existing events and community activities — things like the Alexandra show, which historically has been an integral part of community life and had been flailing for a while, with attendance down. We had a spring spectacular marquee, with kids' activities and performances. That has led to increased attendance and increased community involvement and community connectedness. We have also helped with the Rotary art show to develop a youth division to allow young people to actually exhibit their works next to famous, well-known local artists. We have participated in community events such as the Alexandra Youth Day Out, the Celebration of Life Festival, Children's Week and Rural Health Week.

We have great connections between schools and the local community. We have really worked on developing those, so we have been the conduit to setting up things like the art classes at Alex secondary designing logos and calico bags for the Thornton butcher. The kids have actually done that, which is also another real and engaging thing for them to do rather than just sit in the classroom.

On some of the outcomes of this project, in the second handout I have some figures on participants — the number of people who have been involved. We have provided a lot of activities. We have provided young people with something that is fun and engaging to do. However, according to the shire's youth strategy consultation, this lack of opportunity is still seen as an issue even though we have increased the number of activities on offer. I think further resources are required to increase the number and range of activities to better meet youth needs.

Community participation and involvement of young people is changing our shire. We have sculptures that young people have been involved in in town here, in Yea and in Eildon and we have murals. There is an increasing cultural involvement and there are increasing opportunities in cultural areas. Young people have had an input into their townscapes and their communities and community life. They get to have a say in what goes on and what they do. Young people have developed skills and connections with other young people and with adults in the community. That has enhanced community connectedness, their sense of belonging, life choices and self-esteem.

A positive image of young people has been promoted and through that the positive value of our youth. There is a potential for partnership with the Murrindindi shire in the redevelopment of the Alexandra leisure centre to incorporate a performing arts and exhibition centre which would also help to embed the youth arts project here, as the Yea Community Shed has for the Yea community. That is it.

**Mr INGRAM** — Cath, with the tracking data and the pledge, have you looked at the potential of going back two or five years after to see exactly what the results are? Twelve months may not necessarily give you a good indication. The indication is that a large number of country kids move back after that first year or move elsewhere and then they are not picked up in the data.

**Ms KESTERTON** — I think our next step for the project in general is to look at how we collect data and how we tap in to those kids once they have left — how you actually get that tracking data once they have left the area or if they are still in the area but have left the school. They would certainly be really useful figures. I guess the figures for the one year are aimed specifically at whether they have met that pledge, which is made for 31 March that year. Obviously what we are really interested in is the long-term impact of that and whether a few years down the track they are still engaged in positive future choices.

**The CHAIR** — Have you found that the kinds of programs you have are changing the attitudes of young people to living in a rural community, in Alexandra and also surrounding areas? Have you seen a change in that respect at all, in the comments they might be making — instead of, 'I'm bored' to, 'Well, there are things to do'?

**Ms KESTERTON** — I think the ones that have been involved feel less that there is nothing to do, but there are still a lot who have not been involved, and there are a lot of activities that do not meet everyone's needs. It is changing and the connection they have with their community, with adults and with other people who they may not have known beforehand provides ongoing opportunities as well. I think there is still further to go with that.

**The CHAIR** — With the pledge issue have employers stuck to their agreement as far as looking for apprenticeships or traineeships that they can offer, has there been an increase in the offers for young people in the area?

**Ms KESTERTON** — I have tried to track down the number of apprenticeships on offer or locally over the last few years but I have not been able to get hold of that information yet. Anecdotally I think there have been more apprenticeships offered locally. Employers have recognised there is something they can do. Some of that comes to the fact they want to help and do something about young people having future options but they did not know how they could do that, but through the program they can have kids come out to their workplaces and talk to them about the opportunities that might be there for employment. That is one of the ways they are honouring their commitment.

**The CHAIR** — With the students who have signed a pledge and have not quite honoured their side of it — there are not very many — are you able to follow that up with them. It is a perfect target group in terms of getting them back on track and so forth?

**Ms KESTERTON** — Yes, the figures for the 2004 year 10 school leavers — there are three I know who I suspect were mis-recorded through the school's tracking system and they actually went on to another school. We have not got that specific information. If they have gone to another school, it is great; but if they have disappeared off the radar, then I do not know how we can find them to follow it up.

If they were in the local area and we had their names, that is the stuff we need to do but the on-track data does not record any personal information whereas we need to actually have that information with names and contact details so we can try to follow it up as much as possible. Hopefully somewhere along the lines we will be able to track those kids down, but if they leave and we have no contact details, I do not know how we can do it, but we would like to.

**Mr INGRAM** — On youth leadership, what level of recognition is there within the community of the merit of having youth leaders being promoted, recognised and being involved in decision-making processes within the area?

**Ms KESTERTON** — I do not know how to answer that question. My feeling is there is a recognition that that is important; that youth leadership is acknowledged as a significant factor for both young people and the community in general given that young people will be the leaders in the future. I do not have any evidence about that. Given the commitment that a lot of the adults in the community have made it seems that is important to them and is acknowledged.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for your evidence. I think if you can do your on-tracking and get the data — what you are doing is correct because if young people feel their community respects them, they will in turn want to live in that community or go back to that community after they have experienced the world. That is the theory, but I am sure it is correct, so keep up the good work.

**Witness withdrew.**