

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
Research Officer: Dr P. Chen

Witnesses

Ms A. M. Pell, regional director (affirmed); and
Mr D. B. Hall, program manager, Murrindindi region (affirmed), Berry Street Victoria.

The CHAIR — Please give your full name and address and the organisation that you represent.

Ms PELL — My name is Anita Margaret Pell, [ADDRESS REMOVED] Moorroopna. I represent Berry Street Victoria and I am the regional director of our services in the Hume region.

Mr HALL — My name is David Bruce Hall, [ADDRESS REMOVED] Thornton. I work with Berry Street Victoria and I am the program manager for the Murrindindi region.

The CHAIR — The evidence that you give will be recorded. You may wish to make some opening remarks and then committee members may ask you some questions.

Ms PELL — Basically what we would like to do is to give you the context of how we started our work in Alexandra in the Murrindindi shire, which will explain the program that has been presented to you and we will talk to you about what we feel agencies like ours can contribute to the issues in your terms of reference.

Around 2000 we were approached by a private foundation to undertake a scoping study in the shire of Murrindindi to determine what the community's primary needs were. The funding from the foundation enabled us to spend a period of about six months to do that scoping study. We did that by personal visits to many people in the community, all the service providers and in close consultation with the Murrindindi shire. They had just conducted a number of scoping studies themselves in preparation for their health plan so we had access to a lot of that material.

We also had a youth worker at the time who had evidence that young people were leaving school extremely early with very few and very limited future options in terms of further education or employment. That was concerning because her work involved working with those young people who were predominately not at school and who were disengaged from school or at risk of disengaging from school at a very young age — years 7, 8 and 9. That scoping study indicated there were major problems in young people leaving school early and leaving the area because of lack of opportunities or their perception of lack of opportunities in the region.

The foundation was very keen for us to develop a program that would have a community approach to whatever the problems we found. So we developed a program that was a whole-of-community approach to dealing with early school leavers. What we did was we developed programs that would reach from birth right through to mid-secondary school. There are a number of different programs, ranging from early literacy programs through to some others that Cath has explained to you. It is interesting because the three foci that you have in your terms of reference are the exact issues that were raised for us and that we identified, and they were the exact things we went about trying to address.

Once we presented our information to the foundation and our plan, they funded us for a three-year period for a pilot program. Part of the pilot program was to have the evaluation conducted. We put that out for tender and Victoria University won that tender and conducted the evaluation over the first three-year period. We were re-funded at the end of the three-year period last year for a further three years, and included in that is more evaluation.

I was really interested to hear your comments; they were all around what our evidence is.

The initial evaluation probably could have told us little bit more than what we hoped we would receive, so we have gone about the setting up of the plan for our evaluation very differently. Whilst Cath was saying that she was not very sure about how to go about doing that, we actually have someone on board who is actually scoping out the best way to get that information, to track that information.

We had a very recent meeting with the foundation just in the last few months, and they are very keen for us to submit to them a further application for a deeper evaluation.

Mr INGRAM — Can you name who is supporting you?

Mr McQUILTEN — Who is the foundation?

Ms PELL — I am sorry, it is a private foundation.

The CHAIR — Even I do not know.

Ms PELL — I am sorry, most of the staff do not know either. It is very reputable. Berry Street is extremely careful about who our partnerships are with, and we are very, very proud to be a part of them.

Mr INGRAM — That is all right.

Ms PELL — I suppose one of the things that we learnt, probably in the first 18 months, is that of the programs we thought would be really helpful for the community, probably 45 per cent of them the community felt were going to be helpful to them, and they certainly put a challenge to us. As we developed working groups within the community they certainly put a challenge to us by saying, 'I do not really know that we really need this, this is what we need'. Our program was flexible enough to make those changes.

One of the products that came from that was our being able to use the principles of the Beacon Foundation in their No Dole program, which has been a huge success. The research shows us that, the evaluation shows us that, and it also shows us that in terms of the connections that have been made with the young people, with the families and with the businesses and the general community. Our whole purpose was to create stronger connections between the community and schools and business. That was our whole aim from the original scoping, with the main aim of acknowledging that many young people who want to further their academic studies in a tertiary sense would probably leave the area, but what we aimed to do was to strengthen the relationship that they had within the community in order to get them back. That is the long-term tracking we will need to do, and we will do that, because the foundation is extremely committed to this area and will want to continue supporting it in some way.

I guess what we wanted to say to you was that that is the background. We are really keen to hear questions from you, but we also have a view about what this may mean for other communities in rural areas because we know that many of the things we have done have been hugely successful. We have no doubt that in another 5 to 10 years we will see benefits from these programmes, simply because of the feedback we are already getting through surveys, which are being done by our current evaluator, just with members of the community. It is very impressive. I cannot give you that yet, because we do not have all that collated, but we will, rest assured.

Mr McQUILTEN — When will you get that information?

Ms PELL — Absolutely, you will.

Mr McQUILTEN — How long before you get that information?

Ms PELL — Some of the earlier material that she has been gathering in the last six months, we should have some findings on that. It is reasonably narrow, but we will have some findings on that within the next three months. We are hopeful that we might also be able to give you some information around the establishment of a longer term evaluation as well, because we know the foundation is extremely keen to do that.

The CHAIR — David, do you have something to add?

Mr HALL — Yes. To be a bit more specific about the development of our programs, the general charter that we were given was to improve life opportunities and choices for young people. As Anita mentioned, one of the real benefits of the way we have been funded is our capacity to look at a broad range of issues and be able to target and then be able to alter track if it is not working out right. That is quite different to how government funding usually happens. You have very concise terms of reference that you must work within, and then even if it is not working, you keep doing it anyway, because that is what you are funded to do. That is the reality.

One of the real lessons we have learnt is that to have that flexibility, so long as you are at the same time accountable, does really allow you to get into that role of community development in a much more targeted manner. One of the other lessons we learnt is the development of universal programs as opposed to specialist programs, acknowledging that it is those who are most disadvantaged that we want to be able to help in the longer term. In order for programs to become sustainable in communities like this, they need to operate across the whole range. The programs that Cath spoke about are not just aimed at those who are disadvantaged. They are as much aimed at those kids who are successful. The benefit from that is that you get a much greater community involvement that will continue to support and keep that program happening.

We have taken that on in all of our program areas. The government at present is funding for those who are absolutely most disadvantaged, but there is nothing happening in the broader picture. That is also picked up in the

area where at present we have very specialist funding for drug and alcohol services for young people, outreach programs for those who have dropped through the cracks et cetera, but that is not helping develop the whole social capital, and for a community like this, most of those services come from a long way away. If we want a drug and alcohol service for young people, that comes from Broadford. What we have done here in this town to try and help solve that is we have developed a shopfront and provided office space and an area for those services to happen. Personally I feel that more generalist-type youth workers would be able to better pick up and relate to young people and would provide a better service to smaller rural communities than outreach and bringing in some of these specialist services.

The other area we have looked at is how we develop social capital generally. That is about saying: how do we get a community to take responsibility for its own, and how much of these issues can we solve on a local basis, because you cannot legislate against disadvantage and you cannot legislate against poverty. Situational poverty we can meet immediately. Transgenerational poverty has to have a direct and major intervention. In the main, if that can come from the local community, that is where it is going to get the greatest support.

The development of family support services has been one that we have looked at. We actually started a family support program, then realised that there were supposed to be services for our community that it was not getting. We then developed a partnership with the agency that was to provide that. We now have a full-time family support worker working out of our office but being provided by the service that was being funded to do it. So it is looking at a whole lot of those different areas that are about how we get a service to a small rural area.

I am going to jump around a bit — excuse me for that, because I have tried to look at where some of the things were missed out. The programs Cath talked about are provided on the basis of a two-day-a-week project worker for two years. For the project in Alexandra we funded a two-day-a-week project worker for two years. The school is now funding that position, and the community is now supporting that. So the funds that were funding that position we were then able to roll over to support a similar sort of development in Yea. Similarly with our early literacy program that Anita alluded to. We funded that for a two-year period; it is now operating as a sustainable project within the Alexandra region, and we have rolled over those funds into the Yea area to be able to get a similar sort of project.

Using that community development model of being able to put in some specialist resources, of which you do not need a heck of a lot, providing some supervision and support for that, developing new community to take ownership of it and then being able to roll it over to other communities has been one of the real strengths of the way we have been funded and supported by our private foundations.

The other area that we have looked at here is the issue of bullying. We had a situation where complaints were made to the shire council about some bullying at the secondary college. The local principal happened in a private conversation to just mention that he had been invited down to the shire to be fronted by the shire council about bullying at the secondary college. He was quite affronted about it. I said, 'Hang on. We have got a real opportunity here. Since when has bullying been the province of schools? I thought it was a community problem'. We were then able to talk that over with the shire and develop from that what is now called the Safe and Caring Communities Committee. That now has arms that look at family violence, issues within schools, occupational health and safety, and issues within sporting clubs, and there are a range of subcommittees now working right throughout the community that are all looking at how we make this a better community for everyone to live in.

We are about to embark on an action research project to actually get some hard data on how the community perceives these issues and equally to work from that to a community values statement which can then be initiated right across all areas of the community. So when you have that sort of flexibility in a community development model, you can pick up on those windows of opportunity and then develop a situation where the whole of a community becomes involved in solving a particular problem.

I will just slip back to a couple of things. The Yea Community Shed was mentioned. There was a community project which had been started and established and had been running within the community for a number of years before we became involved, and it had stopped. They had run out of funds and were stagnating. They had a shed up and were not able to use it. We were able to put in a one-day-a-week worker for 12 months. The shed is now up, operating and vibrant. Partnerships have been developed within the community with the service clubs and the schools, so we now have that as an operating thing. This very small injection of support was able to make a very significant addition to that community.

The CHAIR — Just on that one, I need a bit of local knowledge here. I am a bit vague on it, but apparently there are pottery classes that are held there and from that several people have gone to full-time work in pottery. Is that correct?

Mr HALL — That is correct.

The CHAIR — They have found work in that particular area, which would not have been able to happen without that community program.

Mr HALL — That is right.

Mr INGRAM — Is that similar to a Men's Shed-type arrangement for young people?

Mr HALL — It originally started as the Men's Shed concept and has now expanded. There is a Men's Shed area, but there is also an art-craft area, there is a fully operational kitchen. They have had a couple of Italian cooking groups, and they are now looking at the development of the community kitchens concept, so that will equally involve disconnected people and provide dietary and budget cooking et cetera.

The year 9 Advantage program has been involved with a number of projects with the shed, and they are looking for next year to develop some sort of commercial operation for the young people within the school's year 9 program to be a part of that. It is now well embedded and becoming a very important centre to the community.

Mr McQUILTEN — How many days a week is it being used now, like the shed? You said someone was there for one day a week initially to kick it off.

Mr HALL — Our project work was just to help to get the extra funds and support that. I do not have the exact figures, but I would say it is probably being used at least three days a week at this stage. The committee is still looking to get the rest of the tools and equipment for the Men's Shed side. They have got some, but they have not got the lot yet. The official opening was only a month or so ago, so it is still early days. In the three months leading up to that there was still a lot of the actual physical building within the shed et cetera.

Ms PELL — I will just use a minute to close off and then you can ask questions. What we really believe from the experience over the last four and a half years in working with the foundation to provide this program, which we call Connect for Kids, is that there are many facets of the programs that can be replicated in other small areas. It is not an expensive program; it is a lot of money for a foundation to give us, but in the scheme of things it is not a lot of money.

We know that once we get all of the data and the evaluation together — and all the material is documented and written up; that is very good; our program scope and program designs are all written up very well — we know that we can replicate that across other rural communities. Already our early literacy program has grown legs, and we are working very hard to establish a business arm in our organisation so that we can cope with that, because it is a hugely successful and very interesting program that is very attractive to many other communities. We get calls from all over Australia to assist them in setting up similar things, so we know that this can be replicated. We know that this is something that government should and will be interested in. We really believe that.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Ms PELL — Do you have some questions or anything else you want to ask us?

The CHAIR — When we finish our public hearings and public submissions we will then have to make a report to government, and the basis of that report will be mostly recommendations to government about what people told us are the really important practical things that we can do. What in your mind would be the key recommendations that should be part of the report that we could put to them that would be practical and achievable?

Ms PELL — I suppose then the most important thing for us to do is to get you the evidence-based material. We will probably respond to you following this with a letter thanking you for giving us the opportunity and highlighting some of those areas you have just asked about. So we can do that. I assume that we can send them directly to you, Ben.

The CHAIR — Yes.

Ms PELL — If there is any information we cannot give you that we know is coming, we will let you know that in our letter. We will forward you the information as soon as we are able.

The CHAIR — So there are no key recommendations, nothing that you would say that we need to do now?

Mr McQUILTEN — Maybe you can think about it.

Ms PELL — Our major recommendation is that we would like to engage in discussions with government about our particular program and the issues that we have identified in a small rural community, which we believe are replicated right across Australia. We believe we have some ideas about how we can help with that — by involving the whole of the community and strengthening the community. That is what we would like to recommend to you.

The CHAIR — Yes, thank you.

Mr INGRAM — Anita, just following on from that, my area is Gippsland, and there are groups and organisations within my area that are probably doing many similar things to what you are doing. There appears to be a real lack of coordination between regions. They have identified the problems, and everyone is working in their own way, yet there does not seem to be a sharing of information or a united effort at tackling the problem. Would you like to comment on that?

Ms PELL — Craig, that is an issue for us. In our sector we often say that there are very limited opportunities for organisations to showcase what they are doing. By having the opportunities to showcase, we are sharing wisdom right across interested groups. What we would suggest is that, if there is a group of people like those in your electorate who are saying that they have similar stories, the government should make opportunities for organisations to showcase what it is that they are doing. That is something that organisations would love to do but never have the funds to do, because it is very expensive. It might be just a day or two, but they are very expensive to conduct and not something the community services would be able to do. But there is huge benefit in doing them.

Mr INGRAM — Sharing things that are working?

Ms PELL — Absolutely.

Mr McQUILTEN — Our report is one way that you would be able to showcase. It will be printed, it will go out everywhere and it will be in the parliamentary library. Over the next three months — maybe four; I think that is our time line — you are welcome to come back to us with more information, with more to showcase.

Ms PELL — Okay, yes.

The CHAIR — Anita and David, thank you very much.

Mr HALL — Thank you very much.

Ms PELL — Thank you for the opportunity.

Witnesses withdrew.