

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Dunkeld — 16 May 2006

Members

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Executive Officer: Ms L. Topic
Research Officer: Dr P. Chen and Ms C. Tischler

Witnesses

Ms J. Nelson, executive officer, North Central LLEN (sworn);
Ms T. Hancock, executive officer, South West LLEN (sworn);
Mr D. Wheaton, executive officer, Central Grampians LLEN (sworn); and
Mr M. Date, executive officer, Glenelg and Southern Grampians LLEN (affirmed).

The CHAIR — Welcome everyone. This committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise those present that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is covered under the provisions of the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act and is granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments made outside the committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee including an Independent member. We are hearing evidence today on the inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities.

Please introduce yourselves including your organisation and your position within that organisation.

Ms HANCOCK — My name is Toni Hancock and I am the executive officer of the South West LLEN.

Ms NELSON — I am Jerri Nelson and I am the executive officer of the North Central LLEN.

Mr DATE — I am Michael Date, the executive officer of the Glenelg and Southern Grampians LLEN.

Mr WHEATON — I am David Wheaton, the executive officer of the Central Grampians LLEN.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Your evidence is being taken down and will become public evidence in due course. Would you please now make your preliminary comments, and we might have some questions for you following that.

Ms HANCOCK — Local learning and employment networks are a Victorian government initiative. They bring together education providers, industry, community organisations, individuals and government organisations to improve education, training and employment outcomes for young people in communities across Victoria. LLENs play a central role in implementing the government's post-compulsory education and training reform agenda. LLENs are based largely on local government area boundaries. Membership of the local learning and employment network is drawn from any individual or organisation with an interest in post-compulsory education, training and employment within the area covered by that LLEN. Most of our work is around developing partnerships and strategies designed to increase retention to year 12 in education, employment and training. Of course, our main target group is young people.

For the purposes of this inquiry six LLENs — Central Grampians LLEN, Highland LLEN, North Central LLEN, Glenelg and Southern Grampians LLEN, South West LLEN and Wimmera Southern Mallee LLEN — came together and engaged interested parties in each of their LLEN areas. We worked with our stakeholders in a variety of ways. Through our networks we have conducted interviews, sent out inquiries, run focus groups, forums and meetings. The interaction of our stakeholders with the terms of reference of this inquiry has allowed us to present to you a very full view of the ideas, opinions and aspirations of the LLEN stakeholders who are very much engaged in supporting young people in rural and regional Victoria. When our presentation concludes we would like to leave a 16-page submission which is a collation of what we have found.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak. What we will now do is address each of the terms of reference.

Mr DATE — I looked at the first of the terms of reference to determine the factors that influence young people in their decision to remain or leave rural communities, and I have broken this down into the two areas of remaining and leaving. A quick preamble is that there are a number of different factors that influence a young person's decision to remain or leave a rural area, and they may need to be looked at in combination. Broadly, there are some perceptions about young people wanting to experience other places almost like a right of passage in terms of experiencing life outside their rural communities. Anecdotally there seems to be evidence that suggests that communities themselves are not closed to this; communities often encourage their young people to explore, including those in our two shires. I do not think there is any set policy in terms of whether they are encouraging or discouraging that movement of young people.

Some of the key areas that we have highlighted — and I will go through them — include community connectedness. Young people are more likely to remain in their rural communities if there is a sense of connectedness to the community. Young people have said they enjoy a tight-knit small community where everyone knows each other and they can be involved in community activities — for example, sporting clubs, community life, volunteering and being involved with the CFA.

Under the banner of social opportunity we talk about young people being more likely to remain in their communities if they are able to maintain a satisfying social life, and meet friends in a youth-friendly environment in places that are secure and recognised for young people.

Under the banner of personal development and support we looked at the fact that young people are more likely to remain in their rural communities if there is a level of access and support to a range of developmental services, be that counselling or access to services such as Centrelink — also opportunities to develop skills through community projects. We also highlighted the connection to family and friends. Young people are more likely to remain in rural communities if they are happily living with or close to family in a healthy family situation. Young people are probably more effective in their transition from school to work or school to study if they are living in a healthy family environment.

Work force participation is another critical issue in terms of young people remaining in rural communities. If there are a variety of jobs that suit their needs, young people are more likely to remain in those communities. Young people recognise apprenticeships and traineeships as opportunities to enter into a meaningful career and remain in rural areas.

Education is a key issue and only covered in a small way here, but young people are more likely to remain in their rural communities if there is a broad range of educational facilities. Later we have some statistics from On Track data that show the percentage of young people who look at tertiary opportunities at year 12. If those opportunities are not in rural areas, then there is no choice but to leave those areas.

Housing is another issue. I do not suggest that young people might remain if there is more affordable or better housing, but that is likely to be the case. If housing is accessible to young people, then their opportunities and options for staying are going to be enhanced. Evidence also shows that young people continue to live with their family if relationships are good. So they will take that opportunity to stay in the community, living with family and taking up work and educational opportunities.

Recreational activities — young people are more likely to remain in the rural communities if there is adequate, relevant and accessible recreational facilities.

Entertainment — young people are more likely to remain if there are suitable entertainment opportunities. Affordability and relevance to young people's interests are imperative. Again, that is the remaining side, if you like — remaining in the communities. Standing alone, some of those issues probably need to be taken into context with those other dot points that I have raised — for example, entertainment being affordable. But if a young person does not have the ability to travel to that point of entertainment, we have got some evidence that young people at drivers licence age would be able to get their drivers licence but are not that close to travelling outside of their communities for entertainment's sake — but what about those who are unable to drive?

In terms of leaving, I have kept them under the same sorts of banners, but there are less of them — some of them are less relevant. Young people are more likely to leave their rural communities under social opportunity if they are unable to maintain a satisfying social life, make friends in a youth-friendly and secure environment. Young people would be attracted to like groups or subcultures, which will be possibly outside their rural communities.

Under personal development and support, a young person is more likely to leave their rural community to further their personal and social development where they might feel a need to be outside that rural community. Under that banner as well I see travel again, this encouragement of even their parents and senior people in the community that they should go out and see the world. Under that same category we are talking about the opportunity to pursue relationships, so it might be relationship driven that a young person will leave a rural community, be that to pursue a relationship in a couple.

Anonymity becomes an issue in small rural communities as well. As a young person is growing and finding their own self they might feel like they are being watched or monitored in a small community, hence that might be one of the reasons they are leaving a small community.

Work force participation — they are more inclined to leave if they feel they have a high level of diversity and a greater level of financial security outside that small rural area.

Education is one of the areas that the LLEN is often looking at. Young people are more likely to leave their community to pursue their preferred tertiary course if it is not offered in their community.

Housing — again young people are more inclined to leave if there is a lack of affordable, relevant housing that is accessible to them.

We talked about entertainment. Again, entertainment outside of small rural communities in larger cities has a greater diversity, therefore possibly it is more appealing to young people and one of the key reasons that they might be leaving a rural community.

Ms HANCOCK — Your second term of reference is about identifying and examining the factors that influence young people in deciding whether or not to return to the rural communities. First of all, I would like to present a broader summary of the issues, and then some reasons that we have discovered why people would or would not return. In summary, there is the issue of transport — the type, availability, timetabling and cost by comparison. Transport costs are greater than in metropolitan centres. The distances required to travel are higher, and there is a difficulty in being aware of the current options around transport. The lack of transport impacts on job skill level and a range of opportunities and access to services.

The second issue is access to and awareness of services specifically for young people, and the uptake and understanding of these services — that includes health, education and employment services — as well as a perception that independence and confidentiality in small rural towns can be difficult for young people. They find it difficult to seek assistance as there is little confidence in service providers, if you like, not telling mum, so it deters people from making investigations and finding their own opinion. So the lack of the application of the principles of privacy is an issue for young people.

Entertainment is the third issue — lack of availability of an appropriate amount and type of entertainment and recreation.

Perception is the fourth issue. What we have found is that we need to encourage those who want to leave to go so that they can bring back new skills and experiences. We need to encourage those people to return or find replacements. In our research we found that there seems to be a high number of young people in the metropolitan areas who would come to country Victoria but have no idea how to do that. There is a perception that the ability to move across the centres is probably not that great. It is almost expected that young people leave their home community, and often the fact is that if they do not they are perceived as being losers for staying. We need to change that perception and look at valuing skills, vocations and employment as successful outcomes in themselves and not just academic achievement.

There is a perception that metropolitan life is better than the country lifestyle. We asked if more people needed to be aware of the statistics around those who leave the metropolitan area and drop out after the first year of university or employment because of the difficulties or barriers they faced having left their community. Communities generally need to accept young people back when they return. There is the idea that they bring new experiences and new ideas, and that needs to be valued.

Employers need to accept change and new ideas by listening and understanding. Feeling valued in the community if you stay is crucial, as well as not being seen as being second grade if you do not go away to get a tertiary education.

The next issue was housing, which you have heard before — the lack of availability of rental accommodation; the lack of availability of housing suitable for young people, and the cost of rental accommodation. We need to resource agencies that can assist in these areas.

Next are issues of identity and inclusion or lack of it — what resources and skills have been developed prior to moving on or staying local. We need to authenticate the choices as being equal, so regardless of whether you stay or you go, each of those choices should be valued or can be valued.

The whole community needs to increase opportunities for cross-generational activities for exchange and sharing ideas and values — for example, arts festivals, community events, business opportunities and community forums.

The next issue was valuing difference. Young people who are perceived as being or see themselves as different — that is, the same-sex attracted, the disabled, Koori, and young people from non-English speaking backgrounds — feel that they are not valued. These young people express feelings of isolation and are often distressed because of discrimination and the inability to be included. Connections in our community — schools, families and communities — are required. Being valued and heard in the community is essential. Positive family reputations in the community can influence young people's opinions and choices — for example, in employment.

There is a fear of change among people who have stayed in the community for a long time. This leads to the last issue, being around work force participation — access to choice, access to quality opportunities, access to work experience and structured workplace learning experiences, access to good career advice, and access to career advice relevant to local communities. Often people are not employed to their skill level because of lack of availability of suitable employment. Often there are more or perceived better opportunities elsewhere or outside of the community area and a limit of post-compulsory opportunities in skill shortage areas. Often people just have to go so they can find their choice of employment. Also the informal job market plays a large role here, where quite often the children of families that are connected or in the know are the ones who will find the employment or find opportunities that are more suitable to them. If you have no connections in that informal job market, your opportunities are also limited.

What influences someone to return? One of those influences is their ability to remain connected while they are away. Having said that it is a valuable experience to leave, why would someone come back? One of the reasons they would come back is that they had been able to remain connected in some way while they had been experiencing their job or tertiary education. Also the access to that job market is often informal. If you have remained connected or you already had connections through your family, it is much easier to return because often you will get that job that has not been advertised.

A vibrant community will attract a young person back to their home town after they have been travelling. With availability of housing, there is no point coming back if you have to either live with mum or dad or live in a position or in a way that you are not accustomed to, or indeed if there is no available housing. Many of our smaller towns certainly do not have rental accommodation available for people to be returning.

As to job opportunities, young people who are able to gain meaningful employment, either in their desired field or elsewhere, will come back. With the fact that they have generic employability skills — and that points back to your education in the first place; perhaps your full secondary education and your experiences through that education in your local community — there are employment opportunities so that young people can step into higher positions, compared to metropolitan competition. An example is that often middle-management positions are available with more dollars attached and opportunities for career advancement. So we know that there are opportunities for people to leave and come back into the job market and to bring their skills and abilities into rural Victoria — if we can just remove some of those barriers such as housing and perception.

A point made by someone was that we need an exchange program. Certainly that is among the things that LLENs work on — interacting with other secondary schools and bringing young people out into the country and vice versa. The last point is that often people are returning because they have no money after they have been travelling, which is one that I can relate to several times.

What influences a non-return? Feeling established — there is certainly a cohort of young people who move away and are happy to move away and will stay away. I guess it is their replacements, then, that we are looking at, and at perhaps encouraging people who are not from that community to come. Many people outgrow their community and their return is perceived as a failure. The loss of their connections and their memories of their childhood have given them reason to not return. That is a valid point someone made.

Quite often, even though a return is desired, there are not many young people in the area, so it is not viewed as desirable. We have seen some statistics where in a small town by the year 2010 most of the population will be over 64. A young person returning to that community probably does not see that as a fairly good idea.

There is also access to services and infrastructure. Young people who are parents want to live near hospitals, schools, recreational facilities such as pools and playgrounds. As well as there often being an understanding that the infrastructure needs in a town are great, or the need for an upgrade of infrastructure is great, there is often a perception that those infrastructures and facilities are not going to come to that town. Examples are gas and the

upgrading of water facilities and all those sorts of things. What we have learned through our consultation is that in those smaller towns there seems to be almost a feeling of loss because the towns are not going to be supported through infrastructure. That is my contribution.

Ms NELSON — My submission will be shorter. In relation to the strategies and recommendations that might be taken to increase the number of people who decide to remain, I will pick up a couple of points that have been discussed. The first issue is around social opportunity. These are not necessarily in order of priority; a lot of them have some value. We certainly feel that there need to be increased available resources for funding for youth activities in these towns. They might include things like the existing ones that need to be ongoing and supported — FReeZA, the blue-light discos and those types of things.

What we feel and what people are telling us is that there is a sense of connectivity that will help re-engage a person after they have left and come back, or that they felt valued while they were there and that their needs were met while they were there. What we have found out is that that might come at a much earlier age — that it may not need to be addressed as they are 19 and rolling out of the gates of school, but at a much earlier level.

The transport issue is about the availability of possibly community buses for youth group activities and public transport on a much smaller scale for young people to get to other local communities for work. Particularly in my area, the north central, where there are 9 or 10 towns half an hour apart, they cannot access the vocational opportunities that might be available locally due to the fact that they cannot drive and they cannot get there because there is no regular public transport. That would also lead to a social interaction between those young people in those communities. Therefore even if it were not in their immediate environment that they were making connections and having social opportunities, it would still be within the rural area. Again that would lead to the sense of feeling connected, around that.

They need the ability to travel for work and post-school study as well. They need the ability to come home. In many rural areas the public transport cannot get them back home on a weekend; several of our areas do not have weekend transport at all. If they want to return to feel connected and stay in contact with their family, they cannot without public transport get back home. That is certainly the case in our area, where there is no bussing into our town at all. Many of our towns do not have weekend transport.

In relation to jobs we are definitely showing that we need some continued traineeship and apprenticeship schemes, including the NEIS program, providing industry mentoring for young people on the possibilities around investigating and establishing their own businesses, and continued funding, obviously for the LLENs, where they need accessible specialist youth employment services to be delivered locally within the rural area. These services need to happen within these communities. Again some of these services do not come to our local communities at all, and again we have that transport issue for youth who may be looking to investigate employment opportunities.

Around flexible and accessible education opportunities, funding can enable the neighbourhood houses and secondary colleges to offer flexible and responsive education opportunities for young people according to the youth interest and to the community synergies and partnerships. Obviously some of these are already going in the VCAL and VET provision, but I think there is probably room to expand more creative delivery around the needs of rural youth.

On community connectedness, we need funding to enable the adult community volunteers to be trained as youth mentors, again giving the young person a sense of value while they are still currently living in the area.

We need to look at continued support from government to enable the community strengthening projects to be funded and to operate including but not just limited to the community capacity-building initiatives and community building projects, say, from the Department for Victorian Communities.

An interesting thing that has shown up in our research in speaking to some local councils is that at a local government level each individual council decides where that funding priority is. Many of our local councils are not currently seeing the youth worker as that priority, so they are not hiring people that might be in a prime position to actually coordinate a lot of these services that might be out there but are not being actually brought to their rural area.

Those local government councils are not necessarily viewing that as a priority, the funding that could be used to support someone to do some of this work is not seen as a priority, and councils are not actually engaging people to work at a local level with the young people.

Our funding is to enable the development and availability of child-care facilities, enable the ongoing generalist youth counselling and support, and provide continued support of the development of youth-friendly public spaces and venues, including education facilities, public Internet and social spaces.

In regard to advocacy, we see as very valuable the continued regional youth affairs networks as a mechanism for advocacy, communication and regional youth issues development and continuing the school-focused youth services and primary care partnerships.

Around that issue of perception, if we were to attract back or replace young people who leave the rural communities we must be mindful that quite often the only knowledge that people in the metropolitan centres have is from the media and the news, and that is certainly not always positive, so we may need to look at celebrating success — and there is a lot of it going on, but it certainly is not getting in the media. I think that is at all levels and all agency levels. Addressing this incorrect perception would go a long way towards supporting young people to return and also to be attracted from metropolitan settings.

Finally, around the issue of education, access to ongoing education and lifelong learning are paramount, not just for the individual but for the ongoing development of businesses and communities. We require modern and up-to-date ideas and concepts within the communities; as well we require access to a variety of information that will assist and develop local access and support attitudinal changes.

I just have a comment from interviewing a couple of young people who are currently engaged in their teaching studies, doing their bachelor of teaching and who have left rural areas. Possibly some of these issues could be addressed in the curriculum for teachers because their perception, too, in our rural areas is that education is the only option and vocation does not rate a mention. I think that is really an interesting thing at the teacher college level — that the value is in the degree. Therefore our young people have that perception that if you return or you stay, then you are a failure because you have not gone on and got the degree and gone on to something else, and we are not actually incorporating that value system into our teaching.

Mr WHEATON — We have 17 pages of notes. We are on page 17 right now, so I will be brief. My part is actually just rounding that off into some recommendations, talking a little bit about perhaps policy directions and those sorts of things. The first thing that strikes us is that no-one really has responsibility for this issue. Is it an education issue? Is it a youth affairs issue? Is it about economic development? It is about all of those things, but if you look to government, where is the leadership coming from? No-one has been given the responsibility to take the lead on this issue.

One of our recommendations is that a government agency or department be given responsibility as the lead agency for coordinating research and developing whole-of-government policy responses and initiatives. I imagine you are going to hear — people have lots and lots of ideas — about what might be done, and I think we would like to see that sitting within a government department or a policy area where they can work through all those suggestions, pick out the really good ones, and perhaps develop some initiatives from there. That is talking at the statewide level.

Looking at a local level, compared to the state average we have a really low percentage of young people who take up university places. Statewide it is 61 per cent going on to university or certificate 4 and above; in my region it is 41 per cent. We are off the pace there. If you look at places like Mildura and other regional areas, they are experiencing similar things.

Young people do not take up university for a whole bunch of reasons. The main one is that they are sick of it; they have had enough study, they do not want to go on, year 12 has been enough for them. But if you take that one out of the equation it is all socioeconomic-type stuff; they are waiting to qualify for the youth allowance — lots of young people have a year off where they build up some cash resources and then go off to university from there — the cost of travel, the cost of study and all those sorts of things.

There is a very interesting organisation in Mildura called Chances for Children foundation. It was started by a group of businessmen having lunch one day. They were served by a waitress whom they knew and they said, 'You

have just finished year 12; where are you going next year?', and she said, 'I have qualified and have been offered a place in law at Melbourne University, but it will be too hard on the family to send me so I have just accepted a job here, waitressing'. After she left the three businessmen thought that was not good enough and they put their hands into their own pockets and helped to pay her way through her first year of university. At the end of that year they said, 'We want you to continue; we will help you again into your second year', and she said, 'No, I am okay now, I have a part-time job. Take the money you were going to give me and offer it to someone else'. That is how Chances for Children was born. They have raised over \$1 million from local industry, trusts and those sorts of things, and they are really giving their young people access to education in a way that they were not getting it before.

How does this all tie into the inquiry? One of our recommendations is about looking at a pilot program to establish other foundations around the state that would do similar works, but also link that back to saying, 'Yes, we will help you go off to university or to do an apprenticeship somewhere else, but we want you to come back. So we will help pay your way to get you through university but you might give us a couple of years and come back and work in the area'.

The final recommendation we have is more looking at your policy settings. As LLENs it is not our responsibility to encourage young people back into the region. Our role is to make sure young people get to year 12 and then make that transition into work and university, but it is not our core business to attract them back to where they came from. But the LLENs are uniquely placed. The government has spent a significant amount of money in establishing LLENs all around the state, so there is infrastructure there that the government could use if it was looking at initiatives, foundations and those sorts of things that LLENs could be champions for and could support at that local level.

For example, there are 16 people on my board. They are local industry leaders; they are from local government; they are from schools. All those people that we would need around the table to make this sort of thing work are already there. It is one of the most important issues that all of our boards have identified. It is probably the most important economic issue for our region. As our baby boomers start retiring and as people who have been in a job for 20 or 25 years retire, there is no-one coming behind them to fill those positions. So the LLENs would be able to coordinate those things at a local level if there were some initiatives coming at a state level. You always give a plug for what the LLENs do, I suppose, when you are doing this, and that might be seen as a bit self-serving, but the point is we are there, we have all the people around the table who could really get stuck into this issue if we were given that sort of mandate of responsibility from government to go out and do it. That is us.

The CHAIR — Thank you. You have obviously done a lot of work and preparation and talked to a lot of people to bring this together for us. It is greatly appreciated. You have done a lot of our work, which is wonderful. Are there any questions?

Mr MITCHELL — I just want to follow up on the issue of the awareness of different transport options you were talking about.

Ms NELSON — There are numbers of ways that young people can get around but because we are dealing with different types of boundaries quite often the need to move one place to another, an example might be from Corangamite across to Moyne, it is not as easy as going from A to B. You might have to cross a number of timetables. Where do you find information? If you are asked to go on public transport from Timboon to, say, Port Fairy, how would you get there? No idea. You could not even find a number in the book.

Mr MITCHELL — So it is not like a coordinated thing where you can match up each shire with bus routes and trams?

Ms NELSON — I think what we have found with the introduction of the competition culture that rural and regional areas have missed out because quite often there is no competition. There may be one provider of the service and if you are the only provider, there is no need to market yourself heavily or provide information to users. Young people are the losers in that. That goes across health, education, employment and transport.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about a fortnight. Typing areas may be corrected but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.