

# CORRECTED VERSION

## RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Dunkeld — 16 May 2006

#### Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield  
Mr B. P. Hardman  
Mr C. Ingram  
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Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman  
Deputy Chair: Mr C. Ingram

#### Staff

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

#### Witnesses

Ms B. Healy, project officer, (affirmed);  
Mr A. Reynolds, Ararat Community College (affirmed); and  
Ms J. Ogdin, Centre for Community Health, East Grampians Health Service (affirmed);  
Mr M. McKew, student (affirmed); and  
Mr J. Metcalf, student (affirmed), Marian College, Ararat.

**The CHAIR** — Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, this committee is empowered to take all evidence on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise all present at this hearing that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise that any comments made outside the committee's hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee including an Independent hearing evidence today in the inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities. Welcome and thank you very much for your attendance today. Please state your full name and address and if you are representing an organisation, the name of that organisation and please make an oath or affirmation.

**Ms HEALY** — My name is Belinda Healy. I am representing the Central Grampians LLEN and the LenZone! Youth Resource Centre.

**Mr McKEW** — I am Matt McKew and I am representing Marian College, Ararat.

**Mr METCALF** — I am Jackson Metcalf and I am representing Marian College, Ararat.

**Mr REYNOLDS** — My name is Andrew Reynolds and I am representing Ararat Community College.

**Ms OGDIN** — My name is Julia Ogdin and I am representing East Grampians Health Service.

**The CHAIR** — Your evidence will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. If you could please make some preliminary comments, we might have some questions following that.

**Ms HEALY** — I will take the lead today. Basically what we are going to do is present the evidence that came out of a forum that LenZone! Youth Resource Centres facilitated. We made some comments that went into a submission that was presented prior to this morning and we will speak basically to that submission from our own personal experiences.

My role at LenZone! is to support young people to find a local pathway. I guess I bring some local experience into this because I was actually born in Ararat and I returned to the community after having gone away and gained further education. From my perspective a lot of the focus needs to be on how to attract young people back after they go away to study. We are already doing things in terms of trying to get young people to stay by linking them with apprenticeships and traineeships.

That good work should continue, but I also think there is a lot to do in terms of attracting young people back and marketing rural life. There were 19 young people present at the forums we held. The people we have invited along today to speak to our submission come from a variety of backgrounds and experience. I will pass to them to talk. Andrew is going to go first.

**Mr REYNOLDS** — I was asked to give my personal story about why I moved to Ararat and my experiences of living in rural towns. Probably the major issue I have had to put up with when I was living in Ouyen, much more than in Ararat, was that I did not play football, and because I was a teacher and I did not have a girlfriend in town, everyone automatically assumed I was gay. I just had to put up with stereotypes; going out to the pub on Friday night was always a bit of a hassle because of the stereotypes and things that were placed upon me. It was just something I had to put up with.

Not playing and enjoying foot ball is always a bit of an issue when you are living in a country town because football is such a major part of any rural community, that if you are not seen to be part of that, then you are seen as shirking some of your responsibilities as a member of the community. You need to find other ways to compensate for that. You do that by getting involved in other committees and things through school or other sporting clubs. That is a slow, hard path for those who are not aware and able to put up with those stereotypes. There are other ways around that; it is just trying to find those yourself and sticking to them.

**Dr NAPHTHINE** — Were you originally from a country community?

**Mr REYNOLDS** — I was born in a rural community, then went to boarding school in Melbourne in year 9, stayed there and completed university and then moved back to the country.

**Mr CRUTCHFIELD** — What are some examples — the CFA or other sporting clubs?

**Mr REYNOLDS** — I have joined the hockey club in Ararat.

**Mr CRUTCHFIELD** — What are the alternatives in Ouyen?

**Mr REYNOLDS** — In Ouyen the alternatives include the CFA and the SES. I went to a couple of SES meetings and that was all right. My main mechanism in Ouyen was to go to Melbourne to spend the weekend with my girlfriend and other friends there, but that is tiring. You finish work at 3.00 p.m. on a Friday afternoon, hop into your car and drive for 4½ or 5 hours and then turn around and drive back on Sunday night with a bit of a hangover. It gets tiring after a while but it is something you do and you put up with. Ararat was more of a geographical choice for my fiancée and me. It is halfway between her family and my family. She has family in the town and there were jobs there for us so it seemed like the right choice at the time, and it was; we are enjoying ourselves there.

One of the main issues we had trouble with in Ararat at the start was finding accommodation. Luckily for us she had family there and we were able to stay with them for about two months. We were looking for rental property but there were not many and they were not very good. The prices they were asking were ridiculous; they were pretty much the same as renting a property in Melbourne, and we had already done that. Now we had come out here and got jobs and were looking for decent rental properties. They are not very nice houses and you are paying the prices you would pay in Melbourne. We did not want to do that because we were trying to save money in order to travel or something. Because of the lack of rental properties we ended up having to buy a house just because it was getting a bit tense living with relatives — as it does! There was nothing worth renting for the price. In a fortnight we would have been paying more than we are for our home loan repayment, so it seemed like the logical choice. Had you asked me in January I would not have had a clue that by April I would own a house. It was something that had to happen; we did not have much of a choice. I have previously lived in schoolhouses at different schools. Some have sold off their houses and others have not, so it is a bit of a local issue.

I accepted a job in St Arnaud. I went there to look for accommodation but there was none. There were two or three rental houses but they were deplorable, and my fiancée pretty much gave me an ultimatum. She said, 'It is either St Arnaud or me'. It was a hard choice! On the drive home from St Arnaud to Ouyen we got a phone call from Ararat, so we turned left instead of right and came down here.

The other problem for us as schoolteachers is the life. In town if you want to go out to the pub it is harder for us because there are students there. Year 12s do not worry us that much because they are old enough to be there and are mature enough to understand that you are an adult and that you need to let your hair down. But it is when you go to a pub and there are years 10 and 11 students drinking that it ruins our night. We go out to let our hair down and have a good time. It should not affect us that much, but you see students there that you are supposed to teach on Monday and it ruins the night. You do not want to go out and not enjoy yourself so you turn around and go home. So that affects us a bit.

There are the perceptions of distance. Our friends in the city see Ararat as 2½ hours away and they reckon it is a long way to drive. You tell them they are spending an hour on the train every day into the city for work and it is really not that much different, but it is the whole perception of distance that Ararat is a long way away. The increasing cost of travel is also starting to affect them. They may be paying the prices for petrol in the city that we were paying in the country two years ago; they see that as expensive.

For a schoolteacher especially, it is wise to accept a job in the country at the start of your career. You can work your way up through positions of responsibility in a country school much quicker than you can in the city. In my first year I was teaching a year 12 class. In a city school you might have to wait to do that. I am a year 9 coordinator. I might wait 5 or 10 years to do that in the city. So there are opportunities for you in country schools, which also have to do with the age of the staff. When I started in Ararat last year I was 23 years old. I was the youngest member of staff, which did not really affect me, but the problem was that I was the youngest member of staff by at least 10 years. The next youngest member of staff at 33 years of age was the next youngest by five or six years. So there is an ageing population in schools which will affect schools soon enough. Ararat has noticed that and is trying to encourage and is actively targeting graduate or younger teachers. It is enticing them with positions of responsibility or by saying, 'If you come here we will give you these classes'. Schools have noticed the retiring age of the majority of their staff. I think that is pretty much all I have to say.

**Ms HEALY** — I will pass over to Matt and Jack who will give their perspective.

**Mr McKEW** — I moved from Mount Waverley to Ararat in 1995 to take over the family farm which Dad's Mum had had. I have been there since and it has been a good change from the city. You pretty much know everyone. You can walk down the street and say hi to half the town because everyone knows you. I joined the footy club, and that is a great way to meet people from other schools and the community. Everyone starts to look after you and respect you a bit more. I also joined the CFA, which is good because I help out the local community in times of trouble.

Next year I will probably be looking to start an apprenticeship after year 12 — plumbing or building. I will probably start in Ararat and see what happens because it is difficult to move away and get a house straight out of school because of the money, as Andrew said. So hopefully I will start in Ararat and then head towards Ballarat and then maybe to Melbourne.

Things that would help keep people in Ararat would be social things like more pubs and better transport. Ballarat is fairly close and pretty good but Ararat needs more social events. Thank you.

**Mr METCALF** — I was born in Ararat and I have lived here all my life. I like it here and I do not think I will move. If I do it will be to study to become a copper or something like that, but then I will return here. But I am thinking of working on a farm. My grandparents have a farm in Pomonal which was burned out in the summer, so I will help them for a bit. I am involved with the CFA in Ararat. I joined in January just before the bushfires, so I got a bit of experience over the summer. I play cricket and footy in Ararat and I used to have a part-time job at the gun club until I got too big for the box things. I now do part-time work at Mitre 10 in Ararat, which is good. There is all the stuff you need there. That is pretty much it.

**Ms OGDIN** — I have been in Ararat for about 18 months in my current position as a speech pathologist at East Grampians Health Service. Previous to my employment there I worked overseas and also in Melbourne. I applied for the position in Ararat because of its scope. There is lots of variety, which really appeals to me. I get a diverse range of clients. It is a great way for someone who is relatively young in the profession to get a broad range of experiences.

I really thought about what would make me stay in a rural community and I came up with four Ps. The first factor is pay; the second is a career path; the third is professional development; and the fourth is partnerships. In regard to pay, it needs to compare to metropolitan positions, especially given that many clinicians work independently and are required to have an extremely broad knowledge base. Basically career paths appear to be more limited in the rural context. At the age of 25 I know that I cannot move any further in my career unless I go into a managerial position. Obviously smaller centres cannot sustain large teams but, having said that, many rural and remote practitioners will be young and somewhat inexperienced, because more experienced clinicians tend to be lured to the larger centres where obviously there are increased opportunities for specialisation and promotion.

Regarding professional development, I have found that in my experience opportunities for PD have been somewhat limited. Some professional bodies, such as my own — Speech Pathology Australia — are becoming increasingly supportive of rural clinicians, which is great. For example, they are starting to subsidise some travel costs so that rural clinicians can attend PD in larger centres, such as Ballarat or Melbourne. Being a sole clinician, I value the contact with other professionals. It is quite vital to maintain professional contact in order to keep up with new research and to network with other clinicians. An organisation called MentorLink, an allied network of clinicians, was established to provide professional mentors to less-experienced clinicians. I utilised it a lot last year, and I really valued it. Unfortunately funding for this project has since ceased, so that is one less thing that is able to keep people networked in the country. Overall I do feel that PD is a particularly undervalued part of my current position, which is quite unfortunate. I know that personally I am not getting as much PD as my counterparts in the city would be getting.

With regard to partnerships, I think that a social network is vital to the retention of youth and also staff. In short, I feel that if an employee is not happy away from the work environment, the less they will be inclined to settle anywhere for a long period of time, let alone a regional or rural community. In Ararat we are lucky enough to have a group of young professionals who meet regularly each Thursday night for a meal and drink. For me, the group has been an invaluable way of meeting people since I moved to town 18 months ago. And you cannot underestimate the importance of local sporting clubs, churches, music groups in making new members of the community feel they are welcome and hence settled in the long term.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — Julia, can I ask you the same question: did you have a rural background? There seems to be an important issue of whether people have a rural experience and hence are more attracted back to a rural environment — the same environment they grew up in — or whether they are born and bred in cities.

**Ms OGDIN** — I was a city girl. I was born and bred in Melbourne. I left when I was 17. I made a conscious decision to go to uni out of Melbourne. I studied in Albury-Wodonga for four years. The course I did — speech pathology through Charles Sturt — was quite focused on encouraging kids to go to rural areas. That was the conscious decision that I made. I did my year in Melbourne and then travelled, and then I made a conscious decision to go rural because I thought I owed it to the community. I suppose four years of having the crisis in rural health care drummed into us really hit home.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — So the significant decision in your life was the decision you made to go to Albury-Wodonga to study?

**Ms OGDIN** — Yes, essentially.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — As a city person, what made you think about doing your undergraduate training in a regional location?

**Ms OGDIN** — I suppose it was the time of life. I was just like these kids. I was ready to explore the world, and I suppose I did it backwards. I wanted to get out of Melbourne and I wanted to see what living away from home would be like, and it was an appealing course. I always knew I wanted to live rurally and that was the lifestyle that suited me. I knew that I would cope better in a smaller environment, in a smaller course and in a smaller town.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — If people are interested in trying to attract new people or young people to country communities, how can we attract from Melbourne your peers or other people who are 17 and 18 and persuade them that doing an undergraduate course at a regional campus or a regional university is a good career choice, and hence we might be able to get them at that stage? How can we attract somebody doing year 12 at Glen Waverley Secondary College to think about doing their course at Deakin at Warrnambool or La Trobe at Bendigo rather than doing it in Melbourne?

**Ms OGDIN** — Scholarships are always positive things. Looking more broadly, I think there needs to be a lot more emphasis on — especially with health care — getting kids from unis out doing their undergrad training rurally. I know that Grampians has a proactive policy in encouraging med students and allied health students out. I have supervised a number of speech students in my 18 months, and I think that is the most positive way for people to get a feel about what it is like to live and to practise rurally, because the issues are extremely different to working in the city. The broader issue is encouraging the unis to get on board.

**Mr INGRAM** — When you made the decision to move to Ararat, did you know that organisations like the Young Professionals and those other sport networks were there, or did you look for those networks once you got there?

**Ms OGDIN** — I did not know they existed before I got there. I was more than happy just to get involved in the sporting side of things — the netball and so forth — but I have to say that from day 1, when I walked in the door, people were very supportive and networked me straight in. They provided me with contact numbers and opportunities to meet people. The organisation I work for has been proactive and has recognised the need to keep people, so they were more than willing to let me know about what was available in town.

**Mr INGRAM** — To take that another step, if you had people come to you from rural areas, saying, ‘We have jobs and plenty of opportunities. Your pay is this, but we also have this network of things within the community to support young people to move into the area’, would that be a bonus or something that should be encouraged before people sign up?

**Ms OGDIN** — Definitely. I know that Ararat Rural City has been proactive and made a CD about recruiting people. They have been quite proactive in letting people know what is available.

**Ms HEALY** — Julia and I were talking in the car on the way up. Basically we said that the job is the carrot that brings you to the country area, but the lifestyle and the social life are the things that keep you there. You

have to be drawn there in the first place, and scholarship programs and incentives and things like that can draw people to an area, but if we can demonstrate that the social life, the group that meets on Thursday nights and the social activities and the ability to make the connections are there, then you are more likely to stay.

**Mr CRUTCHFIELD** — Or go away in Andrew's case. It can work in reverse.

**Ms HEALY** — It depends on whether there is a diversity of interest there. One of the things we have spoken about, Andrew, is if it is solely sport focused and does not recognise that people have a diversity of interests. The Thursday night social group Julia spoke about is not centred around sports or a specific interest. It is open to all young professionals in general. I think the age range is quite broad now. It is there so you can meet people who work in your community and not tailored to any specific interest.

**Mr MITCHELL** — I would like to ask Jack and Matt a question. We have heard that if kids stay in their communities and do not go to Melbourne for education, they are considered to have failed or not made it. Do you see that at your school?

**Mr METCALF** — Not really, no. It depends on what they are doing, if they have picked up a trade or something or whether they are just being bums or whatever.

**Mr McKEW** — You miss out on a fair bit by not going down to uni, though — like making more friends and getting to meet more people.

**Mr METCALF** — The nightclubs.

**Mr McKEW** — But if you give up a decent trade job and you can keep it, it is pretty much worth it.

**Mr MITCHELL** — Do you have contact with kids who have been away and then come back? Do they sit around and tell you all the stuff that goes on down there?

**Mr McKEW** — Yes.

**Mr METCALF** — Yes, from my sister's friends. She is at uni, and they all come back and tell them about it, about how much they enjoy it.

**Mr MITCHELL** — Do they talk about problems like you come from a town and you might be the only one from your area going to a university and suddenly you are mixed up with 2000 or 3000 kids you do not know?

**Mr METCALF** — They find it scary to start with and they are not sure what they are doing. But after a while they get used to it and settle down and then they are fine.

**Dr NAPHTHINE** — Who do you play footy for?

**Mr METCALF** — The Rats in Ararat.

**Dr NAPHTHINE** — Do you play for the Rats, too, Matthew?

**Mr McKEW** — No, I played for the Eagles last year and am taking this year off for work.

**Dr NAPHTHINE** — How are the Rats going?

**Mr METCALF** — Not too bad. We have won a couple — a lot better than last year.

**Dr NAPHTHINE** — Good on you. Good luck.

**The CHAIR** — Do you have anything else?

**Ms HEALY** — No, that is all from us.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for giving us your time today, it has been great. You will get a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks. You can fix any errors but not matters of substance. Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**