

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
Mr J. M. McQuilten

Mr R. G. Mitchell
Dr D. V. Napthine
Mr P. L. Walsh

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

Cr F. Hull (affirmed); and

Mr M. Hogan, Manager Rural City Development, Ararat Rural City Council. (affirmed).

The CHAIR — Welcome, Fay and Mark. I think you were here when I was reading the original statements so I will not go over them.

Cr HULL — I am usually known by the name of Fay Hull. I am a councillor on the Ararat Rural City Council; I am also the chair of the board of the East Grampians Health Service and a number of other organisations. What I have to say today is probably my perceptions as a councillor and person in the community as opposed to representing any particular organisation.

I grew up in New South Wales in a town very similar to Ararat with an almost identical population. I had a local education, went to Sydney and then married a farmer and went right back to rural living. We had two children on the farm and moved throughout New South Wales and Queensland. Once we stopped farming, apart from a short stint in western Queensland in a town with a population of 1200, we never lived in areas with low populations. They were places like Toowoomba, Albury and Dubbo — large centres. I actually came to Ararat against my will. My husband's work took him there. I was enjoying the lifestyle in Albury Wodonga. Our children were going to a private school and life was pretty good.

For the first two or three years, when I had just completed a mature age degree, I could not get any employment in the field in which I had studied, which happened to be local government and accountancy. I ended up working in Winchelsea during the week and travelling back to Ararat on the weekends. At the same time one child went overseas as a Rotary exchange student; the other young person went to university at Charles Sturt in Wagga. Neither of my children has lived in Ararat and except for coming home to visit their parents infrequently, they do not have anything to do with Ararat. One of them came back from overseas and went to boarding school in Ballarat for a while. She and a young lass — she would bring someone home for the weekend — would try to get into the social scene in Ararat and would find the only access to peer groups was to go to the local hotels. Although there were nice people there, they were not people that would normally form part of her social network. So there was absolutely no opportunity to integrate into the local community.

I am going to focus probably primarily on the social network aspect of young people returning to rural areas. I think it should be two emphases — not just young people returning to rural areas but young people from the cities coming to rural areas as well, because that is happening.

Why did they leave in the first place? We cannot talk about them returning unless we talk about that. I am probably repeating a lot of information you have heard before, but repetition sort of reinforces it. In regard to secondary education, there is a perception, particularly among professional people, that the education system does not provide what they want for their children. As Brendan has just said, because you have smaller numbers in the schools, you have a shorter list of subjects, so they feel the education system does not meet their needs.

The more affluent parents tend to send their children away to secondary college. They go to university and they stay away; they just do not come back. The ones that do stay generally stay because their parents want to retain the children within the family network. I think that is important. They do not particularly want to send them away. They would rather have them in the family situation; they would rather have them there as part of the community.

Less affluent people cannot afford to send their children away. They may choose to have them educated locally or they may have a desire to send them away for different subjects that they cannot get access to locally. But they cannot afford to do anything else, so they stay at home. Those less affluent ones, as has been referred to before — and this is an intergovernmental thing — often cannot afford to send their children away to university for tertiary education, so in some cases you are actually limiting their opportunities.

What the children do is take a year off — they defer for a year — because under the current federal system, if they do that they can then access those benefits when it is time to go to university. It still puts a huge burden on those parents to support their children while they are away; and in many cases, if those young people cannot get jobs while they are away at university, they just end up dropping out and coming home and do not complete.

On tertiary education, as I have just alluded to, there is a TAFE college; but it certainly does not offer the range of subjects that the young people would like, and therefore they are forced to go away for their tertiary education. That starts that going away and losing contact. The people who remain take up employment in the retail, farming, manufacturing, finance, health, and education sectors, where tertiary skills are not required. Some enter into family businesses; some do apprenticeships and go on to have their own business. But with the take-up, I actually worked

in the Commonwealth Employment Service for some time, and in that period employers just were not putting apprentices on, so we have a shortage of apprentices now.

The problem I see with the apprenticeship system is that when they do go into those apprenticeships they may see somebody else going to work in a retail environment somewhere else and earning more money. They are spending all those years in an apprenticeship on a much lower level of wage and there is not necessarily a higher level of jobs to go into. As they go into, say, a welding position in a local manufacturing firm, the number of opportunities for them to actually advance is strictly limited.

The people that go away lose all contact with their own friends and lose their social networks — unless, as Brendan referred to, they go to a university which is close to where they live. Ararat rural city has three young women who are locals who went away to university, but it was close enough for them to come home on weekends and maintain their social networks. They came back, got a job within the council and married.

However, the ones that go away to more distant universities come back briefly, but they generally find employment within the city is easier to get. They will come back if they have achieved a degree but cannot get a job in the cities because they do not have the experience. A lot of employers want that combination of experience plus the degree. Some of them come back after a year or two and do get into here, but what they find is that they have no social networks. They find it difficult to access them if they do not happen to be somebody who plays a sport. There is a far wider range of social activities within the cities, so they cannot set up those networks here. I have quite a few case studies here. I will not actually detail them all, but it intrigued me, when I sat back and thought about it, that I was talking about women coming back — it was women coming back as speech pathologists, women coming back in town planning.

I had only one case study of a person, whom I happened to sit with on a bus going to Melbourne the other week, who actually had grown up in Melbourne, qualified, had some experience, spent a long time overseas travelling, met somebody, came back, went to the St Kilda CBD, could not afford a house, got a position in the Ballarat City Council, and applied for and got a loan for a home. That is the only male that I can think of at the moment who has actually returned to the rural areas.

The reason I am referring to that is that the young women who come back inevitably do not already have those local connections, so they just cannot meet the men. Where are the men? For some reason young men are not returning in the same numbers as the women potentially are, and that is that whole social network that I referred to that is an issue.

The other thing is that they go away, they get their secondary education and they go away and get their tertiary education, so today we have a mobile work force. They tend to go overseas. There is a resident of Ararat that I have known for quite some time. He has six children. All six children went to a local school, but they all went away for university education. Of those six children, none will return to the region, and by the end of this year three of them will be living overseas. There is a drain, and there is nothing to draw those people back into the rural community.

Why return? If there is an availability of local jobs; if they want to be close to their family and their social connections; and if they have found, as some people do, that they just do not fit into the city life they would like to come back. But then you take my example. I have two daughters. As I said, they both went to university. One qualified in Melbourne, lacked experience and could not get a job. Four months after she graduated she was searching. She finally found a job in a council in Gippsland and she said the day she left, 'I will work there for two years and then I am coming back to the city', and almost exactly to the day two years later she came back to the city.

Part of it was that she liked the city lifestyle, but the other thing is that she has gone on to do a graduate diploma, a masters, and she is now doing a third degree. She could not do that in a rural area. Unless you can and want to do distance education the access to those higher degrees is just not there — you have to go back to the city.

Why not return? It is about lack of jobs in a chosen career. If you are in a rural area there might be scope for one or two lawyers, one speech pathologist, one occupational therapist and one town planner. There is not the range of jobs available in all of the disciplines that people go away for. You can frequently get better paid jobs in the cities. You do have a cheaper lifestyle, but in the cities you can get that higher salary level and you can go to Chapel Street, you can go to the theatres, and you have a much wider variety of life. For some people that will always be their first choice.

I now turn to barriers to finding a position in the regional areas. There is the case of a very highly qualified person who is actually working in Ararat at the moment. They are in a senior management position. They are actually an overseas person who came to Australia with husband and children. They wanted to work in a rural area. They went through the normal things, the papers and everywhere else.

They went onto the Internet and they found a reference to the local hospital — I have to do them in, and I am on the board, which is not a good thing to do — which was so far out of date that the senior manager who had put the advertisement in has not been in the organisation for five years. The job was obviously quite out of date.

What I have had said to me is that there is difficulty in finding a source for rural or regional jobs that is accurate and easy to find; that if you go onto the Internet, you will get a whole lot of different sources, but nothing will tell you, 'If I want to move to regional Victoria, this is how I go about it and this is how I find the job', and provide reliable information. Mark will talk about that in a moment. There are a few disincentives in the workplace. If you are a person like Julia who spoke to you previously, you may find yourself working alone. You might be the only speech pathologist or the only occupational therapist working in that facility. You might be newly graduated and therefore do not have mentors and other people there to guide you.

You need a mentoring program for so they can work with their peers in another regional centre or a place like Ballarat, or wherever. Then having been on the job for a few years they feel they would like the opportunity to mentor somebody else, but that opportunity is not there because they only have a single position. They may want to do a high level degree but stay in the rural area. If you cannot do that by distance education, then you cannot further your career.

I have talked about the singles who return and cannot find a husband. There is a French teacher in Ararat at the moment. She came to Australia a year ago. The reason she took the job was to do with Brendan. It is very complimentary but I might embarrass him! She rang up and inquired about a position at the high school here, and decided to take it. She comes from France and loves the lifestyle in Ararat. She has joined a Thursday night social group which is the only way she can mix and find a way into the networks. But she says quite frankly, 'Where are the men?'. It is a predominantly female group and there does not seem to be any eligible men. The women who stay behind nab all the good ones. The rest of them go away. They want families and a social network, but it is just not there.

As to disincentives, there is no employment for the partner. You may come back and you may be a professional but you cannot find work for your partner. If there is going to be a regional job network it has to be done in such a way that they can find employment for the partner. There are no networks for childcare and for childhood illnesses. There is not enough quality childcare for working people to access if you are in a job before or after school and for people who do shift work. I know it is not uncommon in the cities but it is certainly an issue.

People want quality and it is not necessarily there. It is really difficult if you are in a community where you do not have friends or mum and dad to call on. All of the workplace issues I referred to before, mentoring, being the only person with education, applies to married people. I can quote a case study of a highly qualified person who has come to work in Ararat in a very senior management position, who has chosen to live 50 kilometres out of Ararat. This person does long hours, often in the evening and is in a town where there is absolutely no child-care support. So that is a really difficult issue.

There are positives that will encourage young people to return including the rural lifestyle, a cheaper cost of living and a good place to raise children. That is often most attractive to the 30-plus age group who are already married and who have children and who are well advanced in their careers. The disincentives relate to a lack of access to a satisfying social life, opportunities to meet potential partners, career restrictions and small work force choice. If you come from a rural area there is not a lot of work for actors. You might be a very good actor but you are not going to find a job. There is also a smaller work force and therefore a smaller number of opportunities.

The opportunity to return relies heavily on potential returnees as tree-change people being able to readily access accurate and up-to-date information about all of the jobs available in regional areas at any one time.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Fay. Are you presenting, Mark, because we are really pushed for time?

Mr HOGAN — Yes. I am manager of rural city development at Ararat Rural City Council. I live at [ADDRESS REMOVED] Ararat. I will go through this as quickly as I can. Obviously in considering the reasons

why many young people decide to leave a region and why some make the decision to return I will try to focus on a number of key areas where Ararat Rural City Council feels that the state government, with support and contributions from local and federal governments, can hopefully make a significant contribution.

The first area where we have had some success, or first-hand experience, that you may be interested in is as a member of the Grampians Pyrenees Regional Development Board. Ararat Rural City Council has benefited from the significant support of the Central Grampians LLEN in delivering a project called Careers Month over the last three years. Essentially the LLEN takes young people out of schools and into the work force and tries to educate them about the career and work opportunities that exist in their own backyard.

The program has achieved great success by creating stronger links between careers teachers and the employment sector, because that link was virtually non-existent before that. The program has also focused on correcting misconceptions of both students and parents about employment opportunities in their own region. There is such a push for students to go to university that they will often overlook opportunities on their own doorstep because they do not know what is there.

This program has certainly helped to turn around some of those misconceptions among our students and their parents. The program has provided an opportunity for employers to gain a better understanding of the changing needs of young people and to promote an opportunity for young people with tertiary qualifications to then return to the region.

Essentially that program was set up with seed funding from the state government. Once that funding was utilised there was no avenue for additional funding to run the program on an ongoing basis. It operates with a very significant contribution from the LLEN with in-kind support by providing the manpower to run it. There is some cash contribution from local government to help keep it going but it is a simple program that with a little bit of government support could quite easily be rolled out across the state, and could have significant benefits, but it is not happening at the moment.

The second area is government-driven employment. I think the state government should be congratulated on its efforts to decentralise some of its departments and sections of its work force to grow jobs in provincial regions, particularly to help young people. But a lot of that has occurred on a large scale in major centres like Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong. It has also happened at a time when populations of smaller regions were declining at the expense of those larger centres that are growing, and they would be growing anyway regardless of that support.

As a council we would support any opportunities for smaller towns — say at second tier levels of 20 000 or less — to benefit from government-driven employment through relocation or expansion of existing work forces. The census data shows that we lose the largest part of our population towards Ballarat and then it funnels towards Geelong, Melbourne and other areas. So it is certainly an issue for us.

In relation to the provision of government services we have had first-hand experience of the loss of things like public transport and the devastation that causes to a town, but also on the flipside we have seen the benefit of returning public transport. I can speak from personal experience being a university student in Melbourne who wanted to stay connected with his local community and who found it very difficult because of the lack of public transport; it was taken away at the time I went to university.

At the moment I am very fortunate in having a work vehicle and being a part of a two-car family. My wife works in Melbourne; she commutes from Ararat to Melbourne to work. If we were not a two-car family she would be forced to use public transport and while the train service is there the connectedness and the ability for her to use that service is almost non-existent because it does not operate frequently enough and the timetable does not support that.

The last point I will make is about the opportunity to provide more flexible funding guidelines for small regional areas. Lake Bolac is a good case study where private operators are putting in industrial subdivisions. Because they own the land — it is not council owned — there is very limited opportunity for them to get any incentives or support packages that give them financial opportunities to grow job opportunities for young people.

Another example is a business that was completely destroyed by a freak storm that went through the town. It was the same storm that started the bushfire. Bushfire victims have an opportunity for low-interest loans from the rural finance corporation. Because this person was not affected by the bushfire, even though it was the same storm, he

cannot get the same loan. He wants to rebuild his business in a bigger way to create three or four jobs for young people in his community but he cannot get that government support because of red tape.

Another example in Lake Bolac is the local kindergarten. It is in a position where it knows that its numbers in the next year or so are going to be quite low, although just for one year. To keep the kindergarten going they are going to have to do some significant additional fundraising, because their numbers basically dictate how much money they get from government to support their kindergarten. If that kindergarten falls over for one year, there would be very little chance of getting it back off the ground again, but if the support is there and the funding guidelines are more flexible for small rural communities, they could keep a vibrant kindergarten going through a difficult period where there are low numbers coming through before there is another rise in numbers that they know is going to be there.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Mark and Fay. We are very pushed for time, but thank you for going to all that effort with your submissions. We really appreciate that. You will get a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks. You can correct any errors but you cannot change matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.