

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

Mr M. Date, executive officer, Glenelg and Southern Grampians Local Learning Employment Network (affirmed);

Dr K. Scholfield, chair (affirmed);

Ms L. Jansen (affirmed); and

Mr N. Isles (affirmed), Southern Grampians Youth Network.

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 at the hearings under oath or affirmation. I wish to advise all present at these hearings that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise that any comments made outside this committee's hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are all-party parliamentary committee including an Independent and we welcome you here today.

Could you state your full name and address and if you are representing an organisation today, the name of that organisation.

Mr DATE — Michael Date, executive officer, Glenelg and Southern Grampians Local Learning Employment Network, but also representing the Southern Grampians Youth Network and the Glenelg Youth Network.

Mr ISLES — Nathan Isles, representing the youth of Hamilton.

Ms JANSEN — Leanne Jansen, representing the youth of Hamilton and the surrounding districts.

Dr SCHOLFIELD — Kaye Scholfield from RMIT University, but today appearing as chair of the Southern Grampians Youth Network.

The CHAIR — If you could give us your opening remarks and keep them as brief as possible to leave us some time to ask questions.

Dr SCHOLFIELD — Thank you for giving us the opportunity to appear today. All of us here certainly hold the aspirations and concerns of local youth, our future citizens, to be of utmost importance. I am the chair of the Southern Grampians Youth Network, which is a loose collection of agencies and community organisations that joined together and are led by three lead agencies — RMIT University, the local learning employment network and Glenelg Southern Grampians primary care partnerships. Our concerns arose out of the fact that there was no united focus for youth in the Southern Grampians area. It is one of the few municipalities that does not support a dedicated youth officer. There were some emerging issues which we felt needed attention. We were also very concerned about the aspirational aspect of youth in our region.

My personal bona fides — I was a youth in Hamilton many years ago — —

Dr NAPHTHINE — Not many.

Dr SCHOLFIELD — You probably know how many. I was involved in youth issues then. I went away for education; I returned and married someone similar. We are now the parents of youth.

I now work in the university where I am involved with a lot of project-based youth issues bringing skills to the region and also I do a little bit of research. In that capacity I have a fairly broad view of youth issues in the region. I am also involved in the local learning and employment network and in the Standing Tall mentoring project in 10MMM, which is led by the Western District health service. It is a unique project which enables youth to find a voice using multimedia and technology. There are quite a number of projects there as well as research.

The three lead agencies all have a kind of purpose in this youth network. The PCP has a health and well-being focus and has done some research around what the emerging issues are for youth. The local learning and employment network, I believe, has already spoken this morning; in its organisational capacity it has a role to manage networks and pull together these diverse groups so that there can be a focus. We also have around 50 or 60 members of the youth network coming from divergent interests representing youth across the region.

We try to bring youth to the table and give them a voice. That is why we have been able to bring Nathan and Leanne here today. They are both graduates of Monivae College in Hamilton and are young people who have elected to stay in the community. It is great to see that. If I can just make one personal observation before we move over to them. As someone who has lived in this region for a long time but been away, I am very conscious of growing up with a bifurcated view of the way youth look like. Often, unfortunately, we have a view that seems to stream our young people to either go away to university or keep them here. That is of concern. I believe every opportunity should be made for people to reach their aspirations, whether it is to go away and hopefully come back

if they have had a positive growing up experience, or to reach their full potential as citizens in the Southern Grampians community.

Mr ISLES — How would you like us to operate? Would you like to ask a few questions?

Dr NAPHTHINE — I think you should tell your story, Nathan — why you have stayed in Hamilton, what the factors were that made that choice and perhaps something about what your peers have done and whether that has been seen as positive or negative.

Mr ISLES — Not a problem. First of all, I have always been in Hamilton. I was born and raised here and finished year 12 in 2004. I decided to stay as I got a traineeship at Gray Street primary school as a general teacher aide. I am also a qualified tennis coach, which has kept me in the area as there is no other coach. That is my employment. Both Leanne and I are coming from a lot of pluses in the area, not so much of the negatives. A lot of my friends are involved with trades. I believe trades traineeships are a big opportunity for those who are not academic or interested in going to university. As I said to Michael the other day when we had a meeting, in my immediate group of year 12 friends I have one mate who has gone to Canberra and all the others are here as builders, plumbers and electricians. In that sense I have been lucky.

Regarding schooling opportunities, the vast array of primary and secondary schools are of such a high quality. I have mentioned my tennis background. There are so many sporting opportunities in Hamilton. There is the opportunity to play any sport you want to. From my point of view that is why I have been so heavily involved in the community — that enjoyment factor has been there for me.

Negatives — I guess the lack of universities on offer. I have come to the stage now where I have made a decision that I want to do teaching at uni and so I will have to move away. In years to come Hamilton might be the place I want to move back to and raise children, that type of thing, for the reasons I have already mentioned. But I have to move away. If there was an opportunity to stay, that would be highly on the cards. I like the country; I am not a big fan of the city. I like going down the street and knowing just about everyone I walk past. In that respect I enjoy the country and I enjoy being here.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Will you go to Warrnambool for the teaching?

Mr ISLES — Yes.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Which is what, an hour and a quarter?

Mr ISLES — An hour and 10 minutes. I am down there half the week anyway — I coach a few days a week down there. I have family, friends, I have a house down there already, so Warrnambool would be the obvious choice.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Nathan. Leanne, would you like to tell your story?

Ms JANSEN — I finished year 12 at Monivae a couple of years ago as well. At the end of year 12 I applied for a bookkeeping position at Axis Accounting Partners. I am now working there full time. I picked up a traineeship doing a certificate II in financial services; I finalised that in the early stages of this year. Axis also offers a cadetship program which gives you the opportunity to go away to study a commerce degree or such part time at Deakin University in Warrnambool — for example, you can do a semester at work and a semester at uni, or you can pick up two days at uni and three days at Axis. That has been very beneficial for a few of last year's graduates from Monivae. They have picked up two days at uni so they travel down, stay overnight and come back, and they are on their way to getting a full-time position at Axis and being qualified. That is like a bonus. I think it is very handy to have that opportunity in Hamilton. I am very happy there. I have family in the district.

As former school captains at Monivae, Nathan and I are still in touch with most of the students in our year level. Using percentages I would say that about 50 per cent had to move on in search of education — they had to seek higher education in places other than Hamilton. I would say approximately 25 per cent would have left because they had no family ties or friendship ties or had not picked up any working relationship in the district. I think a big issue with retaining anybody in a district is the ties they have with that district. If they have family or working opportunities or just enjoy the area, I think that is very important and is what keeps them there.

I would say 25 per cent, as Nathan said, have remained in the area and picked up traineeships or apprenticeships. That has been very beneficial to them in picking up a trade and they will be right for the years to come with a very good job. Of the 25 per cent who left because they had no ties with the district, I do not think they picked up higher education as such when they moved on. I think they have stagnated in monotonous jobs until they can find what they need to do in life — they are looking for where they belong, and obviously it is not Hamilton so they have moved on.

Other than that, I am very impressed. I think Hamilton has a great background for youth. I think we have plenty of youth activities. Kaye was talking about YouthBiz and 10MMM. If the youth can feel they are making a contribution to the local community, it gives them a tie to stay there. They are putting something back which makes them feel that they are at home. I think that is very important — organising the FReeZA concerts and other little activities, the 10MMM *Purple Couch* magazine and other things like that.

The one thing we have is for the students or the youth who live in surrounding districts, using Hamilton as a base — for example, Dunkeld, Peshurst and all those little areas — it is probably a travel issue. We need some form of travel for the younger students who do not have a licence. They cannot get in from areas like that to participate in these sort of activities. That is probably about it. We have plenty of housing and rental properties available for students who are looking to move out of home when they move on. Basically I would say the travel, so they can make that contribution and pick up a tie with our local community.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much, Leanne. Michael, do you have anything to add?

Mr DATE — No. I think it is a good opportunity if you have questions to take the time to ask them.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Leanne, it is often argued that young people leave country communities because country communities are a little bit insular and you do not get a chance to perhaps meet a range of different people and for social outings. Is that an issue in Hamilton — that when you go to the Attic you meet the same people time and again and there is not much diversity other than the Attic at 4 o'clock in the morning?

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — What are you doing out at 4 o'clock in the morning?

Dr NAPHTHINE — I go to the Attic.

Ms JANSEN — I would like to have a dance with you there one day.

Dr NAPHTHINE — That is an offer I cannot refuse.

Ms JANSEN — People who remain in the district often enjoy that aspect. They like to walk down the street, as Nathan said, and have the people they gossip about at morning tea and say, 'Did you see such and such there?' and whatever. If we need that diversification we often travel an hour to Warrnambool or 2 hours to Ballarat to see other people. We are just so close. We are sort of a pinpoint location. We can go to Mount Gambier or 3 hours to Melbourne is not really that long. People in this district are used to travelling so we do not find it hard to jump in the car or get a bus or V/Line down to Melbourne where we can source that diversification of people.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Monivae still has boarders, so you would have had a number of kids from, as you mentioned, Dunkeld, Peshurst, Balmoral, wherever they come from. I would say they are in a different situation to people from Hamilton. In your experience are they less likely to go back to those smaller towns than you are? If so, what are your thoughts about how we can influence them to go back at some stage, whether it be immediately or after?

Mr ISLES — I think you are pretty spot on there. If we use examples that are further abroad than Dunkeld or Peshurst, they are more likely to not go home but go closer to home. If closer to home is Ballarat, or somewhere like that, I do not think they are going to come to school at Monivae and stay in Hamilton. I do not think there are too many cases where that has happened.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Sorry, I have confused you — in terms of going back to their country town. A boarder from Balmoral goes to school in Hamilton; do you think they are less likely to go back to those smaller communities than the students you have talked about — the Hamilton kids — because it is a much smaller town?

Ms JANSEN — I think it depends on the ties. If they are boarding in Hamilton — for example, I had a fairly close friend from a little town outside Horsham and she is working in Horsham at the moment. She went over to Adelaide for university, which is a fair trip, but she is looking to get a position back in her home town. For a lot of people I suppose it is just like Hamilton. We go to school in Hamilton and that is where we were born, so we have family or other things keeping us here — a position or what have you. A girl who boarded at Monivae for a while finished year 12 and went back home and picked up a real estate position in her local town. It is high education here. We have very good education in Hamilton, very diverse. It depends on what they have back home — for example, if they have a friendship group or family, I think they will go back there in comparison to Hamilton, obviously.

Mr DATE — There were a couple of examples Leanne and Nathan gave today about Penshurst. Nathan said one of his mates had bought a house in Penshurst. A couple of them were car pooling out of Penshurst but decided to move to Hamilton.

Ms JANSEN — They have just picked up a house. They also work at Axis Accounting Partners. They are renting a house together because one girl is from Portland and one from Penshurst. They save on travel. They stay in Hamilton and they quite enjoy it here.

Mr DATE — There is that issue of people from other smaller regional areas coming into larger regional centres. The question may be: do they go back to those smaller areas?

Dr SCHOLFIELD — I think there is a strong connection to sport that will often ground them in a community. If parents are going to spend their money on sending children to a larger boarding school, they have almost made a decision to educate their children out of the region in a way. Whether it is subconscious or not, it is the parents aspirations that play a large part in determining what the youth choose.

Mr INGRAM — We have seen a number of examples recently when metropolitan-based educational institutions withdraw out of country areas. We also heard evidence here this morning that one of the two things that keeps young people connected with those rural communities is some link to a rural university or campus. Do you think those metropolitan-based educational institutions have the understanding of the needs of rural students and also the commitment to rural tertiary education?

Dr SCHOLFIELD — I think people are happy to be committed where the resources support them. There has been plenty of evidence where urban universities have made strong commitments to rural areas, and RMIT is certainly one of those. It has basically come in at the behest of the community in the first place. The commitment to support educational facilities in the region is hugely expensive. Given the policy funding framework under which they operate at the moment, all of those universities would be considering how they do it. It is an issue for the universities and government to deal with. I think they do understand it.

There is the issue that fewer rural students do actively participate in higher education. Quite a few of them drop out in the first semester because they have lost that connection that Leanne and Nathan are talking about. I would say there is a lot of capacity for universities to be offering degree programs in regional areas. New learning technologies make that more achievable now. There are ways of doing that. Our nursing program in Hamilton works extremely well. Students can come for two days a week; they do all their learning on two full days a week, some of it by videoconference and some of it by the academics and program coordinators we have there. That model works extremely well. They are able to go back and look after their families or participate in employment outside of those hours.

We have been able to bring nurses into our local community that we would not have been able to otherwise. There is a positive option for kids. Sadly, we have not been able to add more programs to that yet because of the cost of it. It really does come down to cost. I think universities would follow if the encouragement was there, frankly. It is important to have that urban connection with urban universities looking at regional areas.

Ms JANSEN — I would agree with Kaye there. One of my very good friends at school left Hamilton; she was adamant she was going to do a physical education course in Melbourne. She has since dropped out and is stuck in an arts degree. She comes home every weekend because she is looking for some form of higher education closer to her district.

Mr WALSH — Should we actually have geographically tied HECS places to make sure we keep those courses in country areas?

Dr SCHOLFIELD — I think education is fundamental to regional development and as such it needs to be tied to the regions. Yes, I do. I am speaking personally when I say that. I think the only way to really think about local community determination is to have the capacity at the local level. It comes down to being able to make some decisions about the options that we are able to put in front of our own people. Yes, if you can make that happen.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. I know I have probably got 100 questions and I know Denis and others have a few as well, but we do have to keep moving. Thank you very much for coming along today, giving us your time and making a submission. You will get a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks, and you may correct any errors but not change matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.