

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Dunkeld — 16 May 2006

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Witness

Ms R. Davidson, secretary, Stawell Chamber of Commerce and Industry (affirmed).

The CHAIR — Welcome, Rhian. 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 these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise 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 by witnesses outside the committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, including an Independent.

Could you please give us your full name and address and the name of the organisation you represent and your capacity within that organisation.

Ms DAVIDSON — My full name is Rhian Davidson, [ADDRESS REMOVED] Stawell. I am here in my capacity as secretary to the Stawell Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Could you please make your comments as brief as possible, following which we will have some questions for you.

Ms DAVIDSON — Thank you. I asked some chamber of commerce members and also some of my friends in Stawell to give me some feedback on your terms of reference. I will go through basically what they told me. There are two groupings, I suppose, from the groups that gave me some feedback: those who return to the area after being away to study or to gain further training — they were originally from Stawell and have returned there; and the other group is of those who are new to the area and were either attracted there for employment from universities who promote rural employment opportunities, or moved with a partner — it may be that the partner came from Stawell originally or they moved from one rural area to Stawell.

A couple of people came to Stawell cold, but often with just a small connection to the community already. There is a really good variety there. On both counts, of all those groups of people, employment is a major factor in their moving to the town. I think that is quite obvious; I think people would try to have meaningful and good employment. But the choice of living in Stawell was more for lifestyle — a lifestyle where you can afford to eat out, go to the movies, and travel to the city for a show or concert.

It is much more affordable to purchase your first home. There is really no need to rent if you can afford to purchase a home. A lot of people want to save up to travel. A lot of people are looking at investing in the age group that I asked. Twelve people gave me some feedback, and they were between 20 and 30 years of age, on travel and investing. They had just finished their travelling side and were going more for investing for the future — for a family. Most are planning families or will certainly in the next five years or so. On that same note, I refer to the health and education facilities that are available in Stawell.

Some of the initiatives that are aiding the return of young people to our area were incentive schemes for apprentices and trainees. We found that one particular business in the chamber had put 11 trainees and apprentices through his joinery business. Of those 11 or 12, only 2 remained; the rest had all gone away. While there was some good financial incentive for the business there, it would be beneficial to have some incentive to try to keep those young people, once they are fully trained, and to make them stay in the area.

I refer to promoting opportunities for apprenticeships and trainees in rural areas to people in the city. I think a lot of young people in the city — somebody mentioned this before — are lost souls in a big city and might be lonely,, and if they came out to the country they might find some real benefit to that. Universities in the cities are known to promote rural opportunities, but I think the boundaries can sometimes be a little blurred. One person who was studying medicine had to do a rural rotation; it was a 12-month rotation. We were joyous, thinking, 'Rural — they might come out to Stawell'. They went to Geelong, and I am not sure if you would really class Geelong as a rural location.

Mr WALSH — It is a suburb of Melbourne.

Ms DAVIDSON — The boundaries are a little bit blurred there.

Socially I think young people will come and stay in a town if there is a good social network. It is almost as important as employment and the opportunities there. Feedback I received confirmed that young people want to feel engaged with their communities. One way of doing that is to build community leaders. Often I think teenagers who are raised in rural areas feel as though their opinions are overlooked and they do not feel as valued as they

could. There are many organisations that support the opinions of young people, and providing them with some constructive assistance to move into leadership roles will certainly help a young person's commitment and sense of value in a rural community.

On a social scale, new people to town have very little opportunity to connect to a community, unless they are particularly adept at joining organisations and clubs. I think some people are socially out of reach, they do not know how to go out and meet some young people. Therefore, having community leaders to link those other new people into a town is vital, and they can meet and greet other new people as well.

In addition, if young people are planning families, good health facilities are important. Stawell has an excellent health facility and a couple of people mentioned that that was a real plus in their return to the town. Education facilities are also very important.

There are some great initiatives which are a real bonus to our area and I will name them. Things like Country Racing Victoria and its recent campaign have drawn up a great social activity in rural areas. Wineries are a big thing in this area especially. While the Yarra Valley around Melbourne and those types of places have always been quite popular, I think there is some real opportunity to promote our wineries to young people. Initiatives like the A Day on the Green concerts they bring to wineries are also a really good idea; just promoting rural Victoria as a great place to live for that lifestyle so you can do some really niche things as well. I think young people think if there are no cinemas or no shopping complexes to come and visit, then it is not worth living here but I think if you can get involved in a fairly proactive group, the fun is made for you and you can join in and tag along.

We have some great leadership initiatives in the area and I think they need to be promoted for people who are already in the town to aid and assist those people who are coming in. Promoting industries and government departments to rural areas would also be very beneficial. I know the cost of production and outgoings for industries has already proven effective when they move to a rural area, and that type of thing promotes a lot of benefit to young people. That is pretty much all for me.

The CHAIR — Have you lived in Stawell all your life?

Ms DAVIDSON — I have. I grew up in Stawell. I moved to Melbourne for eight years and I returned four years ago.

The CHAIR — Why did you choose to come back?

Ms DAVIDSON — Probably more my family — my family is still based rurally. Also, I found everything was just too far away in Melbourne. Even my friends were too far away and it was too hard — it is much easier living in the country.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Did you come back for work, though?

Ms DAVIDSON — No, I did not actually.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — You came back and then looked for work?

Ms DAVIDSON — I did, yes, and actually found myself a better job than I think I would ever have got in the city and am extremely happy doing what I do now.

Dr NAPHTHINE — You mentioned a business which had trained quite a significant number of trainees and apprentices and only retained some of them as others had gone away. Has the chamber of commerce or the businesses thought of perhaps keeping track of their apprentices and trainees, particularly apprentices they have trained up and who have graduated and become boilermakers, fitters and turners and whatever else, who might go and work somewhere else? Perhaps there is some way of keeping track of them so they might, in 5 or 10 years time when they are thinking about family and lifestyle and things like that, attract them back.

For example, most of the apprentices who do apprenticeships in Stawell have probably grown up or lived in Stawell so they probably have family in Stawell and it would probably be easy to keep track of them through their families or through emails — directly send them a newsletter about what is happening in Stawell — so that perhaps in 5 or 10 years time when they are thinking about where they are going to go for more permanent work, they might maintain contact with Stawell and you might get them back as experienced tradespeople.

Ms DAVIDSON — That is a great idea. The president of the Stawell Chamber of Commerce and Industry is actually the owner of that business so I will put it to him; it might be one of his projects.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your submission today and for talking to all of those people beforehand. You will receive a copy of the transcript of your evidence in a couple of weeks; you may correct any errors but not change matters of substance. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.