

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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Ms S. K. Admans, chief executive officer, Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (sworn).

The CHAIR — Welcome, Sylvia. If you could please provide us with your full name and address, the name of the organisation you are representing and your position within that organisation.

Ms ADMANS — My name is Sylvia Kay Admans. I reside at [ADDRESS REMOVED] Mandurang. I am the chief executive officer of the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal, based in Bendigo.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for coming along today. If you could give us your comments as briefly as possible, we will have some questions for you following that.

Ms ADMANS — I have prepared a submission and I would like to stick to it, because then I will stick to it. I will give some background on the foundation and myself and then some specific comments against the terms of reference. What I will be talking about is obviously not information localised to this region but more broadly across the state.

FRRR — the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal — is a national philanthropic foundation for the benefit of rural, regional and remote Australia. Our mission is to champion the economic and social strength of Australia's regional, rural and remote communities through partnerships with the private sector, philanthropy and governments. Importantly FRRR is listed in the federal Income Tax Assessment Act with a special listing that gives us greater powers than normal philanthropic organisations. We are one of only three national bodies that has that tax status.

We are a company limited by guarantee, governed by a board of directors. Our chairman is the Right Honourable Ian Sinclair and there are eight other directors. Our two founding members are the Australian government and the Sidney Myer Fund. Our major activities are the delivery of grants on behalf of our own foundation and a growing number of partners. We also provide information and advice. We advocate for change and we undertake representational roles consistent with our mission. FRRR began operations in 2000. We have our offices in Bendigo in Victoria and a staff of 4.4 plus a part-time company secretary. We have made grants of approximately \$10 million during this period, so we are a national organisation based in Victoria.

Apart from FRRR's great interest in the future of rural and regional Australia, especially through its young people, I as the CEO offer additional perspectives and experience, firstly, as a country kid growing up in northern New South Wales, and then working in urban Australia for the bulk of my working life and returning to work in a regional centre; secondly, as a former member of the second Regional Women's Advisory Council, which advised the former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport and Regional Services on matters of concern to rural and regional Australia; and finally, as a graduate of the Australian Rural Leadership Program. I bring a variety of perspectives to this committee.

In terms of the terms of reference, on the first term of reference I would make the following comments. FRRR has an awareness of issues that contribute to the retention of young people in rural communities through applications that seek funding to support a range of activities for young people. Primarily matters of educational participation and attainment are evident as a factor to influence this. FRRR's rural education program recently commissioned a report into the impact of drought on secondary education access in Australia, and I will make copies available to the committee. It took a case study approach and the communities of Kerang and Cohuna were part of the study.

The study found that the current systems of income support can preclude young people from realising their educational potential especially in continuing on to tertiary study. Examples such as assets tests precluding youth allowance or Austudy and yet the inability to earn sufficient income to become independent may mean that tertiary studies are foregone. A lot of that is to do with the level at which young people are paid when they work within rural communities. They may not even earn the \$16 000 a year necessary to become independent. Educational attainment will often mean that young people will leave rural areas and many will never return. I know you know all those things.

Conversely, many young people who remain achieve lower levels of educational attainment than their urban counterparts — and the statistics on this are well documented — having an impact of lower education levels generally in rural areas, especially among boys. On a personal note, and admittedly I am going back to the 1970s, as an 18-year-old I wanted nothing more than to leave the town where I was educated. I wanted to go where no-one knew me and where no-one had any expectations of me and no-one would discuss me. It meant that I went to Sydney. While it was possible for me to gain a tertiary qualification in a nearby regional centre, the areas of study that interested me were simply not available.

I am not sure what has changed from that time. I also wanted to know about the world outside where I grew up. I wanted to see and experience difference. I never saw any job opportunities for me where I grew up. My career counselling was that I could be a nurse or a teacher, but I did not want to be a nurse and I did not want to be a teacher. In fact I became a librarian, although I no longer work as one. In my view the aspirational opportunities within a rural community and the ability to relate to occupations can be extremely limited, and again, I think not a lot has necessarily changed.

In relation to the second term of reference, and continuing on a personal note, it was employment that brought me back to the country; having a job that was dedicated to rural and regional Australia and that was to be located in a regional centre. While no longer a young person, the move back to a rural area was straightforward because of my experience and my husband's experience of having grown up in the country. Once here a number of issues became obvious — such as choice, diversity and how business operates and can be markedly different. I am a much more relaxed person now I am back in the country.

The theory that those who have grown up in the country are more likely to return has been proven in my case. However, the likelihood of this continuing to be the case must be diminishing because of sheer numbers. As fewer and fewer people populate rural areas, the pool of people able to return must also be diminishing. It cannot be relied on as a strategy; that you want to go back to the bush because your mum and dad are there or you have familiarity with it.

FRRR has recently supported a project with La Trobe University, Bendigo, to offer civil engineering scholarships for students in the Murrumbidgee Basin. These students will have the opportunity to study at a regional university and have employment opportunities in the region during holidays, as well as being expected to take up employment upon completion of their studies. The attractiveness of this project was the retention of skilled young people in rural Australia.

FRRR is also committing additional funds to university scholarships in regional universities based on this model. So we will continue to work just within regional universities. We have also provided a grant to Charles Sturt University in Bathurst to have funds available to support teaching students for their work experience. It was found that trainees were less likely to go to rural areas because of cost implications — for example, travel, loss of income from part-time work while they were away and additional accommodation costs while maintaining their term accommodation.

These small amounts of money — and I say small; they might give students \$500 — have enabled students to gain experience in rural areas they would otherwise not have gone to. The likelihood of them being prepared to return is therefore increased. This same experience is borne out by medical students doing rural placements. I have met some of the Monash students in Bendigo — some of them did not even know where it was before they came — who would never have thought to gain experience in rural communities without the program requirements and incentive to do so. The feedback I have had from them is that their training is much broader, and in fact patients in hospital look forward to seeing them and welcome them, instead of everyone sighing when a group of medical students comes by at the Alfred. These types of examples are only small but they will assist in growing the pool of people with exposure to and experience of rural Australia.

Another factor in young people returning is the relevance of those communities to their lives. The Regional Women's Advisory Council commissioned research into cultural diversity and economic development in Australian communities. Two of these are in Victoria in Robinvale and Shepparton. The message from this research is that communities that are diverse, inclusive, more economically prosperous and more welcoming are more likely to attract newcomers and retain people. I think there are lessons here for a lot of rural communities. This is my only copy of the report and I am happy to table it for you.

Finally, strategies and recommendations. Through its partnerships FRRR endeavours to assist in making rural communities more viable, especially smaller communities. Typically the funding goes to communities of 5000 people or less. It is fair to say that it is done in a small but growing way. Without exception, all FRRR's partners are concerned about issues that affect young people in rural Australia. From the rural education program that focuses on educational issues to a new program we are doing with Australia Post called Stretching the Envelope, they all have young people as part of the target group.

The FRRR has myriad programs that have included and engaged young rural people, and some are featured in our community report which I have here. For the last two years we have conducted a back-to-school program which has provided \$50 gift vouchers to families to assist them to purchase items for their children returning to school. Interestingly, the number of families who have used the voucher to purchase items such as underclothing says something about the level of poverty in rural communities. One principal said that because of the program — and this was here in Victoria — it was the first time he had looked out in assembly and seen everyone in uniform. As a result of this program FRRR is looking to establish a stay-at-school program aimed at years 11 and 12 independent-living students who need additional assistance to complete their VCE. FRRR is currently advocating for exemption of any assistance reducing the level of support that comes to these students.

The issue that it is often a disincentive for philanthropic organisations to provide support in rural education because it may end up cross-subsidising government and not creating any additional benefit overall is very pertinent. I have come across many examples of where this happens and people will simply not make the investment. The message from these programs is that there are students who are still missing out on basic needs to undertake education.

Some strategies for changes — I think it is important to make it possible for people to experience rural Australia in a meaningful way — for example, work experience in rural Australia as I discussed. Student excursions should not always go to the city. We fund heaps of them and they are always going to town, but they are never coming back this way. As far as I am concerned it is arse about. It is not about bringing them to the bush and giving them an adventure program; it is not that sort of stuff that contains the experience. It is experiencing all aspects of rural Australia.

As a government I think it is important to value partnerships. The message is constantly that you cannot depend on any one source of government, yet the state government — and by that I mean the current Victorian government — is ungenerous in recognising other partners, and I think a lot could be done to take on board the fact that the government cannot do it all. There are other partners, but you cannot ignore them; everyone deserves recognition. It is important to encourage philanthropy as a means of local communities investing in themselves. Community foundations are a small and growing philanthropic movement that allow local giving to stay local. FRRR is running a pilot youth and philanthropy program that encourages young people to become involved in philanthropy and learn the skills of contributing to their community.

Support organisations such as FRRR are a responsible and accountable way of giving to rural Australia. FRRR is hallmarked by having simple and effective grants programs in sharp contrast to most government programs. Young people are more likely to seek support from a small responsive community organisation rather than larger and more formal entities. Support for development of new services and facilities in rural and regional communities — for example, head offices outside the city, and increased tertiary studies being offered in rural centres — are the sorts of things that can make a real difference. Get young people involved at a local level and find out what they value and need to make a community attractive to them. The number of communities that we see still chasing funds for skate parks is amazing. The lack of basic community infrastructure for young people is in strong contrast to urban areas.

Another thing we have come across is encouraging local government to contribute to the solutions and not be part of the problem. The number of community projects that have stalled or been delayed due to local government issues is significant. They are very small things, but they are just observations that I felt I wanted to make as a philanthropic foundation.

The CHAIR — How do you think the state government could better recognise other organisations as partners in the types of programs that could be out there to help rural communities?

Ms ADMANS — By not ignoring them, particularly when they are financial contributors. I have seen it on a number of occasions, particularly at launches and openings, media releases. It is like nobody else exists, and I think that is a really poor message. It does not encourage people to actually contribute and spread the responsibility across communities.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I think all governments are a bit guilty of that.

Ms ADMANS — I think state governments. I work across the whole of Australia and with the federal government, and I think state governments are the best at it.

The CHAIR — Thank you for that. I understand you.

Ms ADMANS — I feel duty bound to make an observation. It is a long time since I have sat before an entirely male panel. I am interested to know why no women are represented on the committee.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — They did not want to come on it.

The CHAIR — What Michael is saying might be quite correct, but the Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee has to be made up of all parties, so obviously that creates some issues. We are all from rural areas, and I suppose it is a matter of fitting in people where their key interests are.

Ms ADMANS — I suppose that is disappointing in a way, is it not?

The CHAIR — Yes, it is, and we recognise that and certainly have made that observation to the Premier and others about that particular issue.

Dr NAPHTHINE — For example, The Nationals and the Liberal Party each only have one representative on the committee, so it is pretty hard to get gender balance when you only have one representative.

Ms ADMANS — There are other issues to find out about that go deeper.

Mr INGRAM — If you look at the representation across the country areas, there is one female minister, and ministers are not going to sit on a committee. In the areas that are rural and regional there are only a couple of female representatives.

Ms ADMANS — Yes, I have had a look at it.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Sylvia. You will get a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks. You can correct errors but you cannot change matters of substance.

Witness withdrew.