

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 J. Black OAM.

Ms BLACK — My name is Josie Black. I live [ADDRESS REMOVED] near Terang. I did not make a formal written submission because I had quite a bit of input in the LLEN's submission. I have been chair of the South West LLEN for four years as well as a member of a whole lot of other regional and local community groups, so I will make that clear as I proceed.

I have to endorse most of the things that Peter McDonald said because I too have a background in adult community education as well as general education, and particularly the lack of long-term planning, the lack of real collaboration between different sectors, and the lack of — to use a popular term — a vision and working towards a vision.

Perhaps I can fill you in. I draw most of my comments from my personal experience with different organisations. As well as the South West LLEN — I was its inaugural chair for four years — I am also vice-president of the South West Institute of TAFE. I am founding chair of the Corangamite District Adult Education Group. I am deputy chair of Terang Resources Inc., and I have been on that committee for 20 years, which does provide youth services throughout the Corangamite shire. As part of those organisations I have managed quite a few youth programs, mainly based on the link between wellbeing and economic participation — so youth enterprises and other kinds of projects.

I am deputy chair of the Greater Green Triangle Area Consultative Committee, and I wish to draw your attention to the new priority areas for the federal government's regional development program Regional Partnerships — that is, that one of the new priorities is youth capacity building and youth leadership. So there is a potential for quite a bit of partnership work between state and federal governments through that priority area, and also community groups and the federal government.

I am a member of the committee of the South West Rural Financial Counselling service, and we are primary producers, so I have a good understanding of primary industries and the challenges there. I am chair of the South West Community Capacity Consortium, and the two projects that we have initiated in the South West, which takes in those six local government areas which now form the Great South Coast region. We have initiated two projects. There has been the establishment of a community foundation, and FRRR has been of assistance to us and continues to be of assistance to us in that endeavour, and we have had the first meeting of the board of the Great South Coast Community Foundation, the aim of which is to keep wealth in the region and use that wealth for the wellbeing of the region. The other initiative is the south-west volunteering project, and youth volunteering will be a major component in the sense of connecting young people with their communities. We have heard a lot about the value of connectedness.

I am on the council of Terang College, and I launched Education Week for the south-west region at Terang College last Monday — yesterday week. The theme of my talk was 'Get involved in your community', because getting involved reaps many, many benefits that are not foreseen in the initial idea of getting involved. I am also on the steering committee of the Terang and district community building project, which is just getting started.

I wish to address three things quickly: who is responsible; employment and training; and transport — the perennial transport. On the first one — who is responsible — I resort to the old proverb, it takes a village to raise a child, which means that everybody is responsible.

Young people are not the responsibility of families alone or education alone, everybody is responsible — and I am going to lay it firmly at the feet of local government. As the tier of government closest to the people, any efforts to engage community and to build the capacity of community, including young people, lies with local government. It is the closest to the people and from there it should move up. I know that local government is a little nervous about that, and it has heard me say this before.

We need a collaborative approach, which many people have mentioned already. We need an interdisciplinary approach. I know that the LLENs are based on that intersecting, interdisciplinary approach. However, the LLENs are not service providers; they are depending on their membership actually providing the services. Yes, I support joined up government and the regional management forums and the benefits that they will reap, particularly since the executive officers of local governments are part of those regional management forums.

In my view youth matters are critical to community strengthening. I say that because young people do have a wish to be part of their community. They have visions about their community, and I have to say that often they are overlooked. Whether it is local government putting together its strategic plan, its corporate plan, or whether it is

communities putting together their plans, young people are not often consulted. Young people do have views, they do have visions about how they want to see their future in their community, and they should be taken seriously on that.

I would like to see, at local government level, a high-level committee for youth. I know local government provides services to youth — and sometimes it is done through economic development, sometimes through the community services sector and sometimes through recreation and culture, but what I am talking about is a high-level committee at local government, to advise local government on youth matters. When I say high level, I mean at the same level as they might have an economic development committee. So it would mean bringing in industry, employers, recreation, health, education and training across the board — that interdisciplinary approach.

I have to support what Peter McDonald said — that often youth services and programs are short term, and from my observations they are usually based on activities or projects rather than addressing fundamental structural imperfections. So by all means have activities and projects, but they should be a way of achieving the longer term, broader, more fundamental changes.

I have listened to young people talking at youth forums for years and years in different locations, and the things that I hear them saying — and they do not change usually — are very worrying. They talk about the low status of young people in the community; ‘We are not taken seriously’, they say. They are worried about community and other people, including schools, employers and sometimes parents; they are worried about the perceptions of their success, the perceptions of youth success.

It pains me when I hear young people say that if they decide to stay and take on an apprenticeship locally, they are seen to be failures, that they are not aiming for something better, and better usually means going to some prestigious university in another place. They say if you stay, you are seen as a failure — losers stay in rural towns and rural areas, and winners leave. That is what I wanted to say about who was responsible.

Regarding employment and training, everybody knows that we are suffering a skills shortage right throughout rural Victoria. In the south-west where I live, in the dairying area, we are having relatively good seasons — well, this season is going to be good and last season was not too bad — there are jobs just begging to be filled which are not being filled.

I want to say a little bit about apprenticeships. Apprentices are dropping out. Young people who are attracted to begin an apprenticeship often do not finish it. Their pay is abysmal. Sometimes their working conditions are appalling and sometimes their employers are inappropriately chosen. Those factors need to be addressed at a high level. When a young person goes into an apprenticeship and then they look at their peers, who have gone into, say, a cadetship, retail outlet or something like that, and they compare their working conditions and their rate of pay they think, ‘I must be a bit of a mug, doing this.’ So looking at rate of pay and conditions of employment of apprenticeships in my view is a high priority.

The school-based new apprenticeships have a lot of potential, but they are not ideal. They are not as ideal as some people think and they are not the solution for all industries and all trades. I mention specifically two trades. One is engineering and the other is automotive, where young people who are in those trades or training in those trades need to spend more than one day a week on that job — for example, as has been pointed out to me, if you are doing engineering and you dismantle a piece of equipment or machinery, and then it is the end of the working day, you have to leave it dismantled, and it is a whole week before you come back to it. Many employers just could not handle that. So we need to think carefully about the potential of school-based new apprenticeships.

I want to talk now about the rural industries in particular, and specifically agriculture and rural studies. People in the region know that I have spoken out about this in the past. Rural industries again have many opportunities for young people. They are poorly presented at every level — in the media, by industry leaders, and also at schools and particularly by careers information. Most of the careers information that young people get about rural industries is outdated. It is often inaccurate, it is often presented to them by people who have very little experience of rural industries themselves.

I do not have to tell the members of the committee how important rural industries are to the economy of this state, and particularly dairying in the south-west. We need a high level, comprehensive strategy to present a more positive future for young people in agriculture and rural industries. It needs to be presented in its reality, that it is

diverse, it is rewarding in both monetary terms and in career choices. So it may be a public relations exercise, but it may be something more substantial.

Young people can find an economic future in the region, whether it is in farming or food processing or other aspects of the agricultural industry, and we need to present it in terms of careers, not jobs. Young people can find a satisfying career in agriculture and other rural industries.

The third thing is the perennial discussion on transport. People in my small town say to me, 'How is it that we see all those school buses parked there all day, not doing anything, between 9.30 and 3 o'clock? Why can't they be used to take students to TAFE? Why can't they be used to take students to the nearest adult and community education centre? Why can't they be used to take young people who are trainees or apprentices to their jobs?' I do not have the answer to that. We not only have school buses sitting there for many hours during the day but we have buses attached to health services and we have buses attached to elderly citizens groups and so on which are not being used for most of the day. There needs to be some rethinking of these resources so their use is maximised.

At a regional forum held in this very room three years ago, and organised by the Greater Green Triangle Area Consultative Committee, there was a suggestion the media picked up, but not many people took seriously, about how we would address the problems of transport for apprentices and trainees, particularly rural apprentices and trainees. The suggestion was restricted drivers licences for young people. I do not think that is beyond the realm of possibility. I think it needs some careful consideration. Why could 17-year-olds or even 16-year-olds who have an apprenticeship or a traineeship but have no means of public transport in rural areas not be issued with a restricted drivers licence? If they have a learners permit it could be upgraded to a restricted drivers licence. By 'restricted' I mean they could only drive to their place of work or their place of training. It could be determined by a geographic boundary or mileage and it could be restricted to five days a week. Thank you for listening.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. I thank everyone for their attendance today.

Witness withdrew.