

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Halls Gap — 16 May 2006

Members

Mr B. P. Hardman

Mr R. G. Mitchell

Mr C. Ingram

Mr P. L. Walsh

Mr J. M. McQuilten

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

Ms J. R. Linley, director, marketing and development (sworn); and

Ms B. L. LeSueur, manager, community lifestyle and wellbeing (sworn), Northern Grampians Shire Council.

The CHAIR — I have a statement to read before we begin. 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 all present at these hearings that 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 witnesses that any comments made outside this hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, which includes an Independent.

Would you please state your full name and address, the name of the organisation you represent and your position within that organisation?

Ms LINLEY — I am Justine Ruth Linley of [ADDRESS REMOVED] Stawell, and I represent Northern Grampians Shire Council.

Ms LeSUEUR — I am Brooke Louise LeSueur of [ADDRESS REMOVED] Stawell, and I also represent Northern Grampians Shire Council. I am the manager of community lifestyle and wellbeing.

The CHAIR — If you would make your submission for about 10 minutes, that will give us time to ask you some questions.

Ms LINLEY — We might be a bit of a tag team, but I will start. I will give a brief background on the average age of the population in the key towns in the Northern Grampians shire, because that has particular relevance to how we might respond to the questions before the committee. The average age of the population Halls Gap is 33 years; the average age of people in Stawell is 39 years; and the average age of the population of St Arnaud is 44 years. So we do not have a homogenous shire in that sense with regard to small rural towns; it is quite significantly different across the shire. Halls Gap is in a growth phase, and generally younger people are located in that town as residents — that is, both the temporary and the permanent population. It is significantly younger than other areas in the shire. Stawell has a higher population turnover but is currently at a replacement level. In any two-year period 1000 people come into Stawell and 1000 people leave. It is stable and there is minimal growth.

The CHAIR — What is the population?

Ms LINLEY — It is 6300 at this time. St Arnaud has a significantly older population. There has been some decline over recent years, but in the last 12 months we have noticed an increase in young couples, with young families moving into St Arnaud in particular. It is not a large growth, but St Arnaud has a population of about 2000 people. The shire has just over 13 000 people all up.

From a Northern Grampians shire perspective, we need to address population decline and stabilisation overall. We have been looking at this in particular as part of our investment plan or investment strategy for the shire to do with economic growth. Doing some very basic calculations, we have been able to determine that by simply encouraging 30 people each year to remain in the shire — so that is a net gain of 30 people — we can reverse the trend towards negative growth and significantly lower the age of our population. Currently the Department of Infrastructure's estimate of the resident population indicates that we are losing 18 people net a year. It is not a huge number, but it is still 18 people.

From an economic development perspective, within the shire we have about 800 businesses ranging from primary producers through to, say, 300 home businesses or micro businesses, so there is an additional 300 on top of the 800 that we know of. These businesses provide 5500 jobs, and those jobs predominantly go to residents within the municipality. But they also extend to the broader Greater Grampians–Pyrenees region, and within that region 46 per cent of the jobs are provided within the boundaries of Northern Grampians shire. Our shire is the highest of the three municipalities within the region, so we have 46 per cent, Ararat provides 39 per cent and Pyrenees provides 14 per cent. Most of the businesses we have — that is, 95 per cent of the total of 800, so about 760 — employ less than 5 people, and 18, or 2 per cent of the total, employ over 50.

We are dominated by the following employment sectors — and this is important in terms of retaining young people, because we have a slightly different business mix from most other small rural shires in Victoria. The education, health and community services sector is our highest employment sector, at 19 per cent; retail and wholesale trade is the next highest at 18 per cent; manufacturing and mining is the next one, at 16 per cent; and

then comes agriculture, at 16 per cent, so agriculture is nowhere near as high as you might expect to find. Hospitality and tourism services is 12 per cent, and that is a growing sector for us; and finance, insurance, property and business services is 6 per cent.

Our issues for the retention of 15 to 25-year-olds are probably ones you have heard before, but they are about providing social, cultural, sporting and recreational opportunities for young people within that age group as a primary area. Transport and accessibility to those social and cultural aspects are important, particularly when we are looking across our shire. Education and employment opportunities are an issue. At the moment we have a number of quite well-serviced primary schools, but when it comes to secondary education there are very minimal choices for people in the shire, and again the choices for tertiary education are very minimal. Professional development and networking are important as those young people start to move into post-secondary education.

For this idea of the retention and return of people in the 25 to 45-year age group, the key motivators are things like the provision of health services and employment opportunities, professional development and career development, and proximity to family — and that is not just in the same town. It is not necessarily about going back to where you were, but maybe being within an achievable driving distance, so you could anywhere within 3 to 4 hours of where your family might be. There is also the issue of quality of education for children. When we are talking about strategies for future retention and return, we have noticed that it is not always possible for people who have grown up in rural or regional areas to return to those areas — in fact, they might still be there. We give an example of people whose original environment has changed substantially. So that includes outer metropolitan Melbourne and places like Gisborne, Werribee, Melton and even potentially Geelong, where people of, say, my age or slightly younger may have grown up in a rural community but that is not the case anymore, so they are now surrounded by suburbia.

One of the strategies we would like to be able to utilise in the Grampians to achieve our 30 people per year target is to try to attract people back to rural areas who may have grown up in one which does not exist anymore. So it is about pitching to people who may have had that experience and who want a similar experience or environment for their own children and families which does not exist for them anymore. They may still be in an outer metropolitan area surrounded by suburbia, but that is what they do not want, and it is a mistake of geography rather than intent. One of our strategies is not just about saying to people who grew up in Stawell or Halls Gap or St Arnaud, 'Come back to these areas', but also about saying, 'This is the type of town which we now have and which you might have grown up in' — or which is very similar to where they grew up in Gisborne, Woodend or Melton for that matter.

Ms LeSUEUR — Just to elaborate on a couple of things that Justine has just said and the whole issue of the sporting and cultural component of someone growing up in a rural area, when this came out I spoke to a couple of young people who had left and had come back to try to gauge some of their perceptions as to why. Interestingly enough, one of the strong themes that came through was they came back to play in the footy side. They came back at age 20 or 21, after they had been away and been educated, because the footy side offered them some payment. That gave them the impetus to come back to the area they grew up in. Certainly at that formative age for young people, the whole sporting connection is a very important one in rural areas and one that we certainly want to try to develop and enhance.

The whole issue of their coming back, after they gone out and perhaps even started young families, is that if they have had a good experience growing up here, they want to come back and raise their own families here. Obviously those who had negative experiences were waiting for the first opportunity to get out. One of the things we are trying to do in having wellbeing as a part of the focus of the council is to actually ensure that those who are growing up here are getting that enjoyment of living in a rural town. We are doing everything we can to assist them to have opportunities, rather than their having to leave the town in order to realise that it is not a bad place to live after all.

We are trying to build on those family connections and things like that, because families are one of the main reasons that people return. Whether it is to help in the family business after they have gone away to have further education or other employment opportunities, it is also about coming back to be part of that family group. As I said before, they perhaps have their own kids, or they are coming back to have that family connection after they have started having a young family.

Mr WALSH — So that means St Arnaud is going to win a flag next year or the year after? They have not won a game this year, have they?

Ms LeSUEUR — They have not had a good start to the season, but it is not about winning. There is no doubt that successful football teams are a major factor in the town in retaining those young people — either that or they will go and play for other towns.

Mr WALSH — As for the strategy to retain or get back 30 additional people, I assume you are pitching that at the under-30s or under-40s more so than the tree-change-type people.

Ms LINLEY — Definitely. We are actually pitching it at young couples or couples who are about to start a family or who have maybe one or two children. It will be targeted at outer western metropolitan Melbourne. We base that on some work that we did two years ago, when we started to do a pitch for our land giveaway. You might have heard of an economic development promotion that we did promoting a land giveaway and a move to Grampians Pyrenees region.

Mr WALSH — That was Avoca?

Ms LINLEY — That was the Avoca one. The result of that was that we ended up with a database of 3000 people who specifically said they were seriously interested. It was not just the idea of getting free land; they were seriously interested in lifestyle change and the ability to come and work in regional Victoria. A lot of those people were predominantly from outer metropolitan Melbourne, so from Ascot Vale through to Taylors Lakes, Werribee, Melton and Hoppers Crossing.

Their specific comments were that they wanted something like the environment that they grew up in when they were younger. They had no idea that they could have that environment here and that it was the same — even though there was not the proximity to Melbourne. That did not worry them at all. They were not doing the commute anyway; they were actually living in suburbia and wanted to come out here. That is why we focused a little bit on that particular group. We have realised, having looked at that, that that is exactly what they are after. It is not that they made a choice to live in suburban Melbourne — they did not. They just happened to wake up one morning and suddenly realised that that is where they were, and it was not where they wanted to be. They now want to see what opportunities there are. That is where we are at the moment. We are pitching at the availability of jobs — ‘These are the types of jobs and these are the types of careers you can have’ — and at the same time we also have really high levels of health.

Mr WALSH — Is this the marketing campaign that I heard Mark Hogan interviewed about yesterday?

Ms LINLEY — Yes, on the weekend.

Mr WALSH — So it is for the whole region, not just for Northern Grampians?

Ms LINLEY — No, not just for Northern Grampians. What we are going to do as the next step for our 30 people is to start targeting school reunions and alumni associations for people from 1982 to 1990 who might be having school reunions now and who we know grew up and went to school in Gisborne, in Werribee, in Hoppers Crossing and in Melton. We will invite them to come and have another look at what is going on here. Again we know they are young couples who are ready to have children or they have young children. Even anecdotally, both Brooke and I fit right slap-bang into that. I grew up in Werribee and Brooke grew up in Melbourne. We have both just moved out here in the last couple of years, and we both have young families. We both came here, I suspect, speaking on Brooke’s behalf, for the ability to have an environment for our children as well as have career opportunities that marry with that. We are just fortunate that we can do both.

The CHAIR — Do you have any strategies in regard to affordable rental housing? We heard that this an issue in St Arnaud and, I am sure, in other country towns in the area.

Ms LINLEY — Affordable rental housing is a significant issue for Northern Grampians. Housing in general is a significant issue. Similarly with the people from Yarriambiack, we have exactly the same problems with planning, in the sense that we cannot rezone land. It takes an inordinate amount of time to rezone land from rural or rural/residential use to residential use. Northern Grampians has just gone through 18 months of getting to the stage of asking the minister if he is prepared to let us go on to an amendment to our planning scheme. That is going to be difficult for us. We have run out of residential land in Stawell, other than infill. So we cannot start a new estate; we simply do not have anything zoned appropriately. It is at least another 12 to 18 months away before

we have appropriately zoned land. In St Arnaud we are a little bit better off; but even in St Arnaud there is not a vast tract of land that we could rezone for residential development. Rental accommodation just does not exist.

Mr WALSH — Do you have any inspiration as to how we solve that rental market problem?

Ms LINLEY — One of the things we are trying to do is develop the skills of some local builders or developers to actually start looking at doing that. You have probably heard that Yarriambiack and Hindmarsh have both looked at this idea of moving people who are in large older-style houses into smaller units. To some extent that is happening in Stawell. I think Eventide Homes is doing that. Eventide has started a small village area up around Stawell that will have something like 8 or 10 units that people can move into. They are able bodied; they are not ill in any way — sort of young retirees — —

Mr WALSH — ‘Independent living’.

Ms LINLEY — ‘Independent living’, that is right. I was trying to find the right words. Hopefully that will free up some larger properties, but that is still on the basis that there are younger people or couples wanting to move into a larger, older property that has high maintenance. That is not always going to be the case. Young people still want good-quality accommodation. As anyone knows who has had to do that rental knock, which I have had to do in the last two years — although I did buy — it is simply not there. So one of the strategies is to encourage local builders to provide that type of accommodation. We have been investigating that more particularly because of the Wimmera–Mallee pipeline project, and the real fear now that if we have an influx of contractors who want to work on the project, there will simply be nowhere for them to go.

They will be doing mini pop-up villages that provide no economic benefit back into the region. That would be just a very short-term fix. What we are trying to work on is the ability to get some accommodation — even if it ends up being tourism accommodation that is generated as a result. Potentially what we are trying to do is get some smaller communities developed with smaller lot sizes. Again, we keep coming back to the issue of planning, so we will be quite seriously lobbying on that just to get a bit of speed up on amendments for rural towns.

Mr INGRAM — You are doing a program to try and attract young couples back to the area. Clearly you have got a lifestyle/environmental advantage here, you have got an easily identifiable brand and you are promoting jobs. One of the other key things is the social infrastructure — health services, transport and things like that. Are people, when they are coming back out here, saying that they are getting a positive experience, so you are not falsely advertising, if you like, the positives of the area? Are they happy that those other things are up to the standard they want when they move into an area?

Ms LeSUEUR — I certainly think we have really good health services, and we are very fortunate, particularly in the Stawell area, to have such good health services. The other areas, like child care and things like that, are something that Northern Grampians has been working on for the last number of years, and they have now developed two children’s precincts.

Mr INGRAM — Communications?

Ms LeSUEUR — Communications are not too bad out here. Obviously there are pockets, and certainly the further out to St Arnaud you head, there are pockets in relation to the ability of those communications. With sporting infrastructure, once again we are fairly lucky within the shire itself, because we have a tangible event that provides a high-profile facility, and our other facilities are trying to come up to that, but obviously they will not be at that standard. But having that international event in a small town provides an international venue that a lot of other towns just do not have. That is certainly a big bonus for us in relation to ensuring that we can provide high-quality infrastructure, certainly around that sporting side.

There is certainly no doubt that there are a lot of areas that as a shire we can improve on, particularly around some arts development and things like that, but there are still some really strong groups and connections in the area providing those services as well.

Ms LINLEY — Yes. The difficulties definitely are transport and accessibility — we cannot get across the shire very well at all — and education. I would agree with Brooke that health services are good, so I do not have any qualms at all that I have come to a place that is any worse than where I was before. In fact I would say that in certain areas it is better. But definitely educational choices and opportunities are not as good as they could be, and

we are very careful, when we start talking about that if we are doing any sort of promotion, to not oversell that, because they are just not there.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for making your submission today and for taking the time to do that. You will get a copy of the transcript in about two weeks, and you may correct any errors but not change matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.

The CHAIR — We are up to the period of time when people might like to make comments from the floor. Is there anybody who wishes to make a comment from the floor? As there is not, I thank everyone very much for their interest.

Mr INGRAM — You did not give them much of an opportunity! Is there anyone who has not presented who would like to come forward and add to what has been said?

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for taking an interest in today's proceedings. We will now officially close this hearing.

Committee adjourned.