

# CORRECTED VERSION

## RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Donald — 17 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

Mr G. R. Stewart, executive officer, Murray Mallee LLEN (affirmed);

Mr J. Webb, chairman, Loddon Murray Community Alliance (affirmed); and

Ms P. A. Currie, program services manager, Northern District Community Health Service (affirmed).

**The CHAIR** — Welcome Tricia, John and Glenn. You were here earlier when I read the opening statement. Would you give us your full name and address, the name of the organisation you are representing and your position within that organisation.

**Mr STEWART** — My name is Glenn Robert Stewart and I am the executive officer of the Murray Mallee LLEN. My address is [ADDRESS REMOVED] Lake Boga.

**Mr WEBB** — My name is John Webb and I am here today as the chair of the Loddon Murray Community Alliance. My address is [ADDRESS REMOVED] Swan Hill.

**Ms CURRIE** — My name is Patricia Anne Currie. I am part of the Loddon Murray Community Alliance and hold the position of program and services manager with the Northern District Community Health Service. My address is [ADDRESS REMOVED] Boort.

**The CHAIR** — Each of you in turn will have something to say, so if you could keep your presentations down to 10 minutes each so we have some time for questions at the end, that would be great.

**Mr WEBB** — We have asked to be distributed to you a very brief couple of pages, which is largely the introduction and the outline of the alliance. The purpose of our presentation today is to present to you an outline of the Loddon Murray Community Alliance, its purpose, how it is going to go about its business, the issues it is looking to address and the initiatives that it is part of — not solely but part of — throughout the region. I will refer to that in part during my initial introduction.

The Loddon Murray Alliance is a community group based on a partnership of 28 organisations and individuals across the areas covered by the Swan Hill rural city, Gannawarra shire and the Loddon shire. The alliance was born principally from a rather innovative program which is running in our region, which is the schools water resources project, which between the local community and the state government has been funded to the tune of about \$800 000, and my colleagues can talk in more detail about that. That project brought to light the need for regional coordination across principally the areas around Swan Hill and Kerang; thus was born, if you like, the area of interest for the Loddon Murray Community Alliance.

The Loddon Murray Community Alliance is currently an interim board of representatives of those partner organisations and it is rapidly and currently moving to a final board representing that region. It is principally involved with the three municipalities. Currently the chief executive officers of those three municipalities sit on the board as board members. We are undertaking discussions very soon with a collective of the representatives of those three municipalities to formalise the structure of the alliance of that board and how it will operate and how it will work with the local government of that region. The purpose of it is to draw together the priorities, the issues, the opportunities and the initiatives from right across that region and collectively make the most of the opportunities that are before us and to deal collectively with those issues.

We are involved in a number of initiatives at the moment, usually in partnership with others, and they are outlined on the second page of that short brief that I gave to you. I was interested in the previous discussion. They include increasing tertiary access into the Central Murray region. As I said before, there is the schools community water resource project; a couple of projects at the Loddon Murray network for vocational and applied learning; the Loddon Murray centre for enterprise learning — aquaculture, which is a major opportunity right across our region. The youth engagement strategy is a new initiative which has just got off the ground at the Swan Hill International College Of Horticulture And Hospitality.

The purpose of the alliance is to create a regional vehicle which represents the broad region, gathers together the regional priorities, issues and opportunities and is a vehicle people from across organisations and from across the region can use to bring those things together to one point where we can collectively work on them; where we as a region can find our own solutions or we can promote our own solutions. We cannot rely on others to bring solutions to us. We need to take that initiative and try to drive our selections ourselves. In many ways, those projects, those initiatives we are currently involved in are very indicative of the sorts of solutions that we are tackling and will be pleased to outline later.

We are, though, at the stage of requiring ongoing resourcing. It has been currently resourced by the significant effort of members of the board and also strong support from the Murray Mallee LLEN and the three councils. As an initiative to become sustainable it does require ongoing resourcing and support, and we have had discussions

with the regional managers based in Bendigo on that issue under the leadership of Penny Armytage from the justice department, who has supported and endorsed the alliance and is currently working with us to seek that funding to try to keep going.

One of the major things we need to do is to draw together the various planning processes that are going out across the region. We are aware of all of the community planning that is going on both at community level and at council level and sometimes between the two councils. We are aware that Gannawarra and Buloke are working collectively on drawing together their community plans. What we are looking to do is create a whole region of plans so that we can talk to the government, we can talk to anybody who is interested in our region about what our priorities are and what the needs of each of the areas across our region are. One of the main issues is that we need to obtain funding to create that community plan, to draw together all of the information across the region, and of course the ongoing executive and administrative staff. That is all outlined in that document. I would be pleased obviously to draw those issues out more. Perhaps I will allow my colleagues to speak briefly.

**Mr STEWART** — One of the issues we did not want to dwell on a lot was the issue of where we have come from. Obviously John mentioned the schools community water resource project on the third page of the handout that I have for you. Similar to most of the other regions as you have moved around Victoria, you will have found a number of these things coming back at you all the time. In our particular region we are probably the second most disadvantaged region in Victoria in relation to isolation, one of the lowest socioeconomic regions in Victoria and we have, or have had, traditional low usage of computers within the region. We are obviously also underrepresented in terms of formal qualifications at both tertiary and certificate level. Then we also have issues such as the high Koori population within the area — I think it is the third or fourth highest Koori population in Victoria — and retention of those young people over the age of 15, and obviously also other issues that are going to kick in harder and harder; and there is the ageing population issue.

Some of the other things that were of significance to us — and this is probably where it all started two years ago with our On Track data — include the number of young people that were leaving our particular region to try to access training, to try to access obviously tertiary training but also vocational training. I think 38 per cent of the students referred in 2004 in On Track in the Murray Mallee LLEN area had to leave the region, so if you wanted to be a commercial cook or a hairdresser, if you wanted to go to an academy, obviously you had to travel 2½ hours to be able to do those things. We do have a very high deferral rate as a lot of smaller regions do because obviously there are a number of issues associated with that.

We did a research study. It was not only cost but also the loss of social connectedness and issues of safety about moving to metropolitan regions. It is significant to note the number of students that we classify under the LLEN banner as at risk within regions. You can notice those high levels, and the alliance does cut across those three LLEN areas — 465 in our particular LLEN, 937 in the Cohuna-Campaspe LLEN and 257 in the North Central LLEN. I bring that to your attention because obviously these students being at risk also means they are at a high level of actually having to move out of the region to be able to seek opportunities.

A Charles Sturt University report of 2006 recommended increased access to VET and vocational activities or courses within smaller communities. Obviously that highlighted the areas of Kerang and Cohuna, but also, as we have just heard, Sea Lake, Buloke and even places such as Donald, where we are today. The Charles Sturt report recommended the establishment of tutor-supported tertiary centres, and that is what we have been working towards with the Loddon Murray Community Alliance — looking to have a supported centre.

The Mission Australia report, which came out two weeks after that, backed up significantly the widening gap between regional and rural Australia and called for the following: the retention of young people, particularly young women, in communities by ensuring the provision of accessible education; training and employment opportunities; expanding access to mobile education outreach services; and the introduction of greater flexibility to TAFE funding models for regional communities, thus improving access and a greater spread of vocational training opportunities. Obviously you can see that where we are coming from is around that training and access to training opportunities area.

**Ms CURRIE** — Over to me. I would like to quote something that perhaps drives some of the passion behind this collective. It is something that Nelson Mandela said, and it is that it takes a whole village to raise a child. Those of you who are parents will well realise that that is a task that is never finished. So whether we are parents, children, the aunties, the uncles or the community members et cetera, we have a task at hand. What I think

we are presenting to you here is a village. It is a regional village and our drums are beating, and we would like to get some sense that you can hear what is coming from this community. We are looking for solutions. We are looking to be creative. We are looking to ensure that there are diverse and sustainable communities. In terms of the bottom line that we are working with, it is understanding that community sits within environment — it sits there socially and it sits there economically — and we have got some fantastic assets in our communities. This particular alliance has really harnessed some of the energy, passion, foresight and vision that sits there. It is something that has a capacity that has been demonstrated in some of the earlier projects — that we can do things together that we could not do if we remained insular or if we remained without optimism and without vigour.

We have come together and formed something that we believe is very worthy of your attention in terms of considering that not only is this particular shape of the alliance a solution in itself to these really concerning issues about ‘Where are young people and how can we have dynamic, diverse and vital communities without them?’ but that we actually are able to demonstrate capacity around linking the assets that are there within our communities. At this point if there are no concluding statements, we are happy to go to questions.

**Mr INGRAM** — Can you explain exactly which regions you cover, which local government areas you cover?

**Mr WEBB** — The shire of Loddon, the shire of Gannawarra and Swan Hill rural city. There is a similar project going on at the very top of Swan Hill rural city, which is the Robinvale project. That has been concentrated on Robinvale because of its particular issues, and we are linking in with those. However, it is covering those three municipalities.

**Mr INGRAM** — I suppose, first of all, playing devil’s advocate, the LLENs are set up to do most of that educational training-type role across those areas. Is this an acknowledgment that the LLEN probably does not have the capacity to lobby or deliver what you are asking? Then I throw up the other thing: why is local government, the councils, not doing that work? I want you to explain why you are different or needed above those other existing organisations and whether this is duplication.

**Mr STEWART** — It is probably fair to say from a LLEN perspective that the LLENs have done some really good work in relation to connecting up the community, and they have tried to work across a number of local government areas. But when we are trying to talk about fairly significant things within regions, particularly in our region — getting university access within the region — it probably has to be done on a larger scale. In our particular alliance we have another LLEN involved in doing that and at the moment another LLEN is considering coming on board, because the EOs are saying to me, ‘Look, we are doing some fantastic things, but when we really want to make some big change it is extremely difficult for us to make that change through our present mechanisms’. So the LLEN model is fine, as I see it, but if you are going to tackle some of the issues that this committee is also looking at tackling, then you must do it from a more strategic position.

**Ms CURRIE** — Can I also comment that within that strategic position, and I think we all know about compound interest, we are the compounding of the value of each of our organisations and the activities within each of the communities. We are actually able to value-add to the particular focus that any of the alliance partners has. Sometimes that can be in the simplest way by sharing ideas, and we know the importance of that — that we are actually thinking broadly and picking up perspectives that come from very different areas as we get going. I actually come with an agenda that is clearly stated, and that is around the health and wellbeing of our communities. But of course that is shared, whether it is through the LLEN, local government or in terms of our business partners and so on. Those agendas are able to be opened up and shared in a way that actually allows us to energise some of our solutions.

**Mr WEBB** — The local government issue is one of the most interesting issues. Firstly just on the LLEN issue, the charter of the alliance is slightly broader than that of the LLEN. One of the things we found when we did the report into how best this vehicle could serve its region was that not only was the issue of the youth and training and education a major issue but retaining young families was one of our biggest issues, so the alliance is looking very heavily at that as well. It is maintaining its focus on youth and all those sorts of things, which is the focus of this inquiry, but we also want to look at the capacity to attract and maintain our young families and give them career opportunities throughout our region as well. It is a little expanded from what the LLENs are asked to do.

With the municipalities, I also had a former life as a CEO of a municipality, and the clearest example that we can put before you is that of the increasing tertiary access into the central Murray region. The Swan Hill rural city represents a population of a little over 21 000 people, quite a large area, and Kerang represents 12 000 to 13 000 people, but those towns collectively have an influence over a much broader area, and collectively those towns represent a catchment of something over 41 000 or 42 000 people. When we looked at trying to do something quite significant in increasing the opportunities for people to do tertiary education within their own region — I have done this myself, and it is very difficult, it is a very lonely undertaking — the Swan Hill rural city recognised that it was not the right vehicle to tackle that alone.

Eventually there was a collective of five councils that needed to be drawn together to deal with this issue, and they represented the catchment of the Swan Hill and Kerang regions. So there is a body, if you like, set up by those councils. They have created a larger regional body with a greater capacity and a greater area of interest to deal with that really important issue up there. So this alliance is really a collective of councils, if you like, that brings more resources to the table to be able to deal with issues that they may not be able to deal with individually or that other councils can add value to, because the councils coming together needs to be at the heart of this alliance.

**The CHAIR** — I am really interested in the establishment of tutor-supported tertiary centres in rural and remote regions. My area is not necessarily remote, but it is rural when it comes to tertiary education. I would love to hear about how you see that working, and especially how you would establish it in small towns like Kerang and Cohuna.

**Mr STEWART** — We undertook nearly two years a study to see what the issues were. We launched that last year, and was released in July. We found that within our region 51 per cent of the kids surveyed — young people in years 11 and 12 — wanted to stay in the region and would if there was a tertiary facility or tertiary courses offered within the region. That was quite surprising. I am an ex-school teacher, and I would have said that most of the kids would want to move away and have some experiences. All the things I was mentioning before about the cost factor, the loss of family and safety issues were the key things that came out of that report. So we looked at a number of different models around Australia. We looked at Geraldton in Western Australia. We also looked at Mount Gambier and a couple of others to see how these outreach campuses or outreach facilities were being run. Eventually we came up with a flexible mode of delivery primarily based around the Geraldton model where three universities deliver courses out of one supported centre through a variety of modes, obviously technology but there is also intense mode and tutorial support.

Our particular model is being considered by two universities, which is unique in itself. We sent it out to some 23 universities to see whether they would be interested in delivering in the catchment areas of Swan Hill and Kerang. At the moment the two are looking at how they can deliver an intense mode, and how they can also provide tutorial support for the students. We are not talking about every course they could do, we are talking about some niche courses at the moment. I can probably tell you that one may be around nursing, one around a foundation study and one may also be around teaching. We are working fairly hard with those universities to get them on board. To have a preferred partner is a coup in itself. They are coming back in June to discuss the model further, so hopefully we can get that down fairly shortly. It is about flexible modes and about having access, but not the normal access we consider for a campus. We did not go into this thinking that we wanted to establish bricks and mortar, because if we had done that we would not have got very far. We have been upfront with the universities and have said, 'We will provide the infrastructure as a community if you provide the courses in flexible mode'.

**Mr WEBB** — If I can add to that, it is also about bringing those people into the region. Rather than the students having to go to the campus for their block release, it is about doing that within the region, whether that is in Sea Lake — and Buloke is a partner in this — or Balranald or Swan Hill. It is about where the best facilities in the region are to undertake these courses with suitable IT and those sorts of things. It is about creating a sense of campus within the region but using existing facilities. It is about those people coming to the region and working with the students. So it is about giving that contact for the students going through and giving them that contact with their colleagues who are also studying, and it is about bringing it to the region rather than everybody having to drive out to access those courses.

The region would provide the administrative support, work out the priorities within the region and work with the university. If that university could not deliver it, it would bring another university to the table who could deliver that course into the region. It could be delivered at Balranald. Surprisingly when we did the study the centre in the

region that had the best IT capacity was the Balranald P-12 college; it was better than any other facility. So it can be delivered, depending on what the course is and where the main area of demand comes from across our region.

**The CHAIR** — Is there a great cost differential in being able to provide education in that particular way? Is that a barrier for you to get it up and going?

**Mr WEBB** — One of the major issues is the cost of sending your children away. Those principal costs were the main differential.

**The CHAIR** — I was talking more about the cost to the university to provide education in that particular way.

**Mr STEWART** — No, the attractive part for the universities is linking with the communities in terms of the infrastructure that is sitting here and not having to provide a campus. The thing that is killing regional universities is providing the campuses and the accommodation that goes with that. At the moment we are looking at that, trying to develop unique ways of not only providing those courses but also looking at unique ways of providing that accommodation.

**Mr INGRAM** — The level of support, particularly from metropolitan-based universities, seems to be questionable at times in providing rural tertiary education. I assume the ones you are talking about are not necessarily metropolitan-based universities?

**Mr STEWART** — In actual fact one is, and one is an interstate university, which may be interesting.

**Mr INGRAM** — You mentioned the barriers for students in this area and the costs and the high level of deferment for tertiary education. Clearly you are not going to be able to provide all the courses that your young people are going to wish to study through a model like this. Have you any ideas about recommendations back to government to resolve some of these challenges that face young people in country areas? Have you any other ideas to put forward?

**Mr WEBB** — I guess we should refer to some of the other projects which were undertaken as well, which include the vocational and applied learning centres and the networks we are looking at. We are looking at the facilities we have right across our region and at the opportunities for learning or study at those. What are the gaps in the training needs across the region? It is all about trying to best use the facilities we have across the region, matching them to the training needs we have and then trying to deliver that across the region. I guess we have to refer to some of the other initiatives that we are involved with, particularly the college of horticulture and hospitality, and I think Glenn can talk more about that.

**Mr STEWART** — The Swan Hill International college is an interesting one. It is only in its infancy as we speak, but it will deliver courses in horticulture and hospitality. The spin-off for the local community is that it will also be able to deliver courses for local young people as well. It is already taking on young apprentices et cetera in hospitality, that I know of. There are also possible links with universities. So we are trying to take an integrated approach. We have a fantastic TAFE with a new campus in the Swan Hill region, but that particular facility cannot provide all the courses that the kids want and which Craig is alluding to. We have to be innovative in terms of how we look at other infrastructure that sits in the region and how we can do things in a more linked and coordinated fashion, and that is what the alliance is trying to do.

**Ms CURRIE** — Perhaps if I can add that it is an approach that is enterprising, to use a term you may well be familiar with. To be enterprising we need to know our areas and share the knowledge of what we already have. Hopefully we would like to think that if you were to hold this inquiry again in a couple of year's time — although hopefully you would not need to hold it again — you would not be seeing three of us who could remember what it was like to be a young rural person but would be speaking with some of the leadership that has been developed across our region.

I hope that that succession of leadership, knowledge et cetera has young people placed very primarily in this particular alliance and the way we do it. There are programs such as Lead On and its Community Door program. We need to link into the capacity they have to help us in assisting young people who are already in our communities not to be overlooked as the gems and assets they really are. We need to work towards a range of solutions. We are talking about multiple strategies with what we are suggesting the alliance would have the

capacity to link to. In doing that the shared vision is about sustainable communities. It is about diverse, vital, inclusive places that all people would want to come and live in, not just someone who has been born in a rural area.

**Mr WEBB** — I think that is an issue. We acknowledge as a region that we are not really trying to keep all of our young people — that is not a reality. Many of them are going to want to go away. They are going to want careers that we cannot offer and perhaps this country cannot offer. A number of them are going to want to go away and then perhaps come back. What we are really trying to do is establish training and career opportunities right across our region that are relevant to our region and therefore give them the choice of staying if they wish. But it also makes us much more attractive for other young people to come to because they can see a career path developing. We were really quite surprised at the response to our surveys, in which 51 per cent said they would really like to stay here if that was at all possible but qualified that by saying that some of that was that they might like to do their initial years of study and then move away. One of the responses we got was that a lot of our young people felt they were not quite ready to go away. Often they would like to go away to experience other things and then come back but they were not quite ready. That really surprised me in the research we did. They would like to do some initial study and then perhaps move away. That initial study would also give them more time to look at our region and explore the opportunities within it. That is really what we are about — trying to provide within our region as many of the training opportunities as possible that are relevant to our region.

**The CHAIR** — You talked before about better use of the infrastructure that is available for education and training opportunities. How do you find the cooperation that exists between the TAFE at, say, Swan Hill and its willingness to reach out to Sea Lake or to Donald or to Cohuna or Kerang to use the secondary colleges, if they have quite good technology, buildings and facilities? Is that kind of thing happening? Is there a reluctance or preparedness to explore those options?

**Mr STEWART** — I should probably declare an interest here. I am also on the board of the Sunraysia Institute of TAFE. It is fair to say that that is now a focus of the institute. It is something that has happened extremely well in Mildura regarding the relationship between the secondary colleges there. It is fair to say that relationship has not been strong within the Swan Hill community but that over the past 12 to 24 months it has really turned around. The institute is now looking around at linkages with the local secondary colleges, both the Catholic school and the high school. It is also broadening its outlook to include other schools in the region — Robinvale, Tyrrell College and Kerang. We are looking at some of those TAFE tasters, as they call them, and pre-apprenticeship courses. But given the nature of the TAFE funding model it makes it particularly difficult for them to engage schools — the fees that are associated with it that schools pay to be able to access those facilities.

**The CHAIR** — How do we address that?

**Mr WEBB** — To extend that, despite those fees, in the research that was done in the development of this model, all of the colleges involved were very keen to be involved and to provide access to their students. They were very keen to show what they have as far as facilities go and what part they could play. The colleges right across the region were very keen, as was TAFE when it was spoken to about what role it could play in the whole thing. We are talking not just about Sunraysia TAFE but also the Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE in our region. There is also a project going on in Kerang which is trying to network the various education and training providers, possibly working through the Kerang Learning Centre, which is based in Kerang. That involves BRIT, the Sunraysia TAFE and the high school in Kerang. There is a significant coming together and sharing; there are schools talking to our hospitals about shared facilities for training right now. We are trying to play the role of facilitating all of those sorts of projects.

**Mr INGRAM** — To pick up the Chairman's point about solutions to the TAFE funding model, it is not the first time it has come up so it appears there is a problem there. Can you detail exactly what the problem is and say if there is a solution?

**Mr STEWART** — If kids want to do a particular course and the facility is at the TAFE — they want to do engineering or maybe another particular course — they will have to pay enrolment fees. For example, if students want to do a VCAL subject, they may pay anything up to \$800 to \$1200 to enrol in those sorts of courses. Of course, that becomes a burden that is placed either on the student or the school at the moment, although I believe there may be some looking at that at the moment from the government's point of view. However, these are significant issues. You would have found they are significant issues with other LLEN executive officers who have addressed you over the past couple of weeks. We have just brought down a group from Queensland — Sarina

community — which has a holistic approach to training and providing those training services. It actually won the regional development award last year in Australia. It was around creating an innovation college around agriculture and horticulture. The issue there is that they pay no TAFE fees. They can access those facilities, that teaching and those courses, pretty well. I suppose that is what it comes down to.

**Mr WALSH** — Do you want to explain for the benefit of the record and the committee a bit more about the international college and where it is going to draw the people from to come to Australia?

**Mr STEWART** — At the moment I think there are potential students from 11 to 14 different countries. Two students have arrived so far and by the end of July there will be 40 students in Swan Hill. The mixture is about 20 per cent hospitality students and the rest will be horticultural students. They are intending to have somewhere in the vicinity of 100 students, possibly by the end of the year. They have rented the Carriages Restaurant in Swan Hill as a training restaurant. They have also rented a motel in Lake Boga, just outside of Swan Hill, for residential purposes. They are looking at other opportunities for accommodation within the region. It is also run by a not-for-profit training organisation, Swan Training, which I am also a board member of.

**Mr WALSH** — What are the countries?

**Mr STEWART** — Brazil, Malaysia and India that I know of so far, but as I said, there will probably be 14 different countries. I think Korea might be another one as well. They are looking at Afghanistan. The Afghanistan ambassador has had discussions with the chief executive officer of Swan Training about maybe looking at taking on a number of Afghani people to train them up. Obviously Afghanistan has lost a lot of its human infrastructure. That is something that is being taken up with the Australian government as we speak.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for your presentation today and for going to that effort for us. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about two weeks. You may correct any errors but you cannot change matters of substance.

**Witnesses withdrew.**