

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Donald — 17 May 2006

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Ms K. Anderson, coordinator, Loddon Murray Community Leadership Program (affirmed).

The CHAIR — Welcome, Kerry. I will not go through the opening statement again. If you could please give us your full name and address, the name of the organisation you are representing today and your position within that, and then please take your affirmation.

Ms ANDERSON — My name is Kerry Anderson. I live at [ADDRESS REMOVED] Castlemaine. Today I am representing the Loddon Murray Community Leadership Program.

The CHAIR — If you could please give us your presentation. If you could keep it to around 10 minutes, that will give us a bit of time to ask questions.

Ms ANDERSON — That is fine. I have dropped off copies which you probably have not had a chance to see; sorry we did not have them advance.

I would just like to start by thanking the committee for the opportunity to present and also acknowledging the contribution of the participants in this year's Loddon Murray Community Leadership Program for their input to the paper that I have submitted. I cannot claim that this is my work; I am representing it for them. I guess you could say we are providing a wide, regional perspective to this inquiry, given that our program covers a region from Swan Hill to Clunes and Gisborne to Donald, so it is certainly a very rural area we cover.

As the mother of an 18-year-old and a 20-year-old — I dare not call them children — I am particularly pleased to add my comments to this submission as well. In identifying some of the factors that affect young people in deciding to remain or whether they should leave their local community, we believe there is a whole range of underlying influences that will require significant cultural change to address. It is not a quick fix unfortunately. Yes, it is normal for people to want to go off and explore the world, and as parents we certainly encourage them to do so. We should not condemn them for leaving their home town no matter how much we need them. However, having said that, equally we should not presume that they want to leave their home town and label them 'unmotivated' or 'no-hopers' just because they do stay in their home town. I think we have both ends of the equation there.

There are countless examples of people who have remained in the one local community all their life and led very happy and productive lives. Undoubtedly their experience and wage-earning capacity may be more limited, but the trade-offs can be anything from a lower cost of living. I was listening to the previous presentation, and perhaps we should be talking about disposable income, not actual net income-earning capacity. We have a sense of belonging and perhaps less stress living in a rural environment. These people do not make the headlines, though, but they are a very important component of our rural communities. Perhaps our expectations as parents and teachers need to be examined in this respect, as every young person needs to choose their own path, not what we think is best for them.

I am sorry, I am sure you have heard this 100 times, but we are faced with a national shortage of tradespeople, and yet every career expo I have attended over the last decade has focused almost exclusively on university pathways. Our agricultural sector cannot get enough fruit-pickers or workers at harvest time. National food manufacture KR Castlemaine is desperate for workers on the factory floor, despite very good wages and commercial opportunities. These are all good honest jobs. Why are we as parents and teachers inadvertently casting a slur on these options? Not everyone has the capacity to be a rocket scientist. Actually, we do not need too many of those anyway, so why do we keep acting as if this is a priority?

I think that the comments in the paper on the perceived and real differences between rural and metropolitan-based universities are also pertinent. Perhaps we need to look at additional support and promotion of our regional universities for this reason. There are obviously fewer career ladders to climb in rural-based organisations; therefore, there is higher competition for a few select jobs. For females, this is particularly relevant, as male dominance in management positions is visibly higher in rural areas.

Contracts renewed on an annual basis can impact on security for young people in professional roles, and we experienced this first hand when we were interviewing for this year's program. We had two people, 100 kilometres apart in totally different shires. They could not commit to the leadership program because their contracts were due for renewing at the end of the financial year, and they were not guaranteed that they would stay on. So I expect on this basis they also have not invested in property or got too involved in their community.

It is not just work related when it comes to dominance. How many community groups have had the same executive for 10 or 20 years? Those few brave young people with fresh ideas who take on this embedded community leadership are usually browbeaten into submission within the first term of office. We are always complaining that

there is no-one willing to take on a job, and when they try, we sometimes do nothing but criticise. Perhaps if we learn to let young people take leadership, make a few mistakes along the way, sit on our hands and say nothing, the end result may not be as bad as we perhaps think.

When it comes time to raise a family, of course this is a time when young people think about returning to a rural area, dependent on employment opportunities, and also the fact that they have fond memories of their childhood in a rural community. So what makes a happy childhood that will influence them to return? Undoubtedly schools, sport and recreation play an important role. They all contribute to a sense of achievement, belonging and involvement in their local community. These really are the foundations of our community. With an increasing number of single and two working parents unfortunately there are more obstacles preventing children from participating in these activities outside school hours, particularly in rural areas where transport and child care are issues.

When it came to suggesting strategies and recommendations to help increase the retention and return of young people to rural communities, you will see that our participants had no problem in creating a long list for you to consider. There are some examples of practical ideas that are already working in specific areas. One mentioned was Lead On's Community Door program in Bendigo, and the other was the Get to Know You program in Swan Hill. They may be worth looking at, and perhaps relevant to rural areas as well.

We focus on building suitable accommodation for the elderly, but fail to recognise young people seeking independence, and that can be important to a lot of young people. They also need affordable accommodation.

Through our primary schools it is important to nurture a sense of pride in community before those children perhaps move on to private schools outside the area. It is also essential for secondary schools to promote broader and more realistic career options. Having said that, I also strongly believe that we as a whole community need to take more responsibility. We need to rethink our attitudes towards young people and get more involved in the schools to bridge that gap between the academics and the real world of business and enterprise.

Often we resort to achievement awards to promote the success stories. There is nothing wrong with this, but I challenge communities to celebrate the everyday success stories of the shop assistants and the diesel mechanics, not just the high-flying university graduates. They deserve recognition too. I am just saying, look at the broad spectrum. Every one of these young people deserves recognition and respect if they are dedicated and successful in their chosen career path.

I wish the committee good luck in its quest. I am happy to answer questions where I can, given that a lot of these have come from other participants. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Kerry, and thank you for all the work you did for your existing program as well. You have provided a lot of information for us. How willing do you find communities are to take part in leadership programs? Do you find that you are getting people who are already leaders in their communities, or do you find that people say, 'I would like to be a leader, and I think I want to have a go at this particular program'?

Ms ANDERSON — My experience of the program to date is that a lot of people in communities would like to have a say but do not have the confidence or the skills to do so. This is particularly so the younger they are. Having said that, our program takes on all ages. We have people aged from 22 to 56 years in this year's program, which is great — that diversity is really important — but they do need the confidence. They realise that they could be shot down in flames if they speak publicly, and people can be very critical when you take on public office. Here I am telling you lot this, but it is of concern. They want to be informed and they want to do things the right way, so sometimes a leadership program is very important to them to help give them that structure and guidance in that respect.

The CHAIR — Are there other mentor programs around the area? Through our hearings so far we have heard that mentoring programs are probably a very important part of creating young leaders in communities, whether it be in business or community leadership itself. Do you find that there is enough of that around, or do you think that there are ways we could encourage more of that and more people to be involved in mentoring, whether they be businesspeople or leaders in the community itself?

Ms ANDERSON — Having been very community involved for 25 years, I must say I had never once come across a mentoring program until I started the Loddon Murray Community Leadership Program. Obviously there are a lot of different programs out there, but it is accessing that information. Mentoring is very important. The graduates actually form a strong bond having been through the program, and I find that our network of almost 200 people is one of the best things for this region in terms of support and assistance to those who do want to take on community leadership roles. Having experienced that now, I wish I had known about it 25 years ago, let's put it that way.

Mr WALSH — The issue of housing is continually coming up, and I know this is an amalgam of all the ideas. Would you be able to take it back to your group for some practical ways that government may be able to get involved in assisting that development of housing in the community?

Ms ANDERSON — I think a number of them would be interested in exploring that issue and getting involved. As you know, as part of the program they are required to take on a project and participate in forwarding an idea to benefit a community.

Mr WALSH — And I am sure we would take a supplementary submission after the hearing, if they could come back with some ideas. One of the challenges we have in writing a report is putting in recommendations. There is a limited capacity for government to deliver and achieve real outcomes on the ground, so could they come back with some practical ways that we could put in the recommendations?

Ms ANDERSON — I would be pleased to do that. I have two working on it already as we speak!

The CHAIR — Kerry, thank you very much for coming over today and giving us your submission. You will receive a copy of the transcript in two weeks. You may correct any errors but do not change matters of substance.

Ms ANDERSON — Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.