

# 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 C. Ingram

Mr J. M. McQuilten

Mr R. G. Mitchell

Mr P. L. Walsh

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

#### Witness

Ms S. H. Christie, manager, Birchip Business and Learning Centre (affirmed).

**The CHAIR** — Simone, I have a brief 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 all 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 by witnesses outside the committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, including an Independent, inquiring into retaining young people in rural towns and communities. Could you please provide your full name and address, the name of the organisation you are representing and your capacity within that organisation.

**Ms CHRISTIE** — My name is Simone Helen Christie and my address is [ADDRESS REMOVED] Birchip. I am the manager of the Birchip Business and Learning Centre.

**The CHAIR** — Could you please provide your evidence for about 10 minutes or so, and then we will ask you questions?

**Ms CHRISTIE** — For the past six years our centre also contracted the Active Youth in Buloke program from the Buloke shire, and I coordinated this program until March of this year.

I was born in Birchip and left in 1985 to study for a bachelor in business, with a major in hotel and catering management. I spent the next nine years studying, working and travelling in Australia and overseas. I returned to Birchip in 1993 after I was married and pregnant with my first child. My husband is a schoolteacher at the Birchip P-12 School, and we have also bought some farming land with my family.

Birchip is a typical small Mallee wheat belt town located 320 kilometres north-west of Melbourne on the road to Mildura with a population of 900 people. It is a proud community and has worked hard to retain services, business and community facilities.

The Birchip Cropping Group, renowned for agricultural research, has been a very positive influence on the community. It has approximately 19 staff. Most are young professionals with degrees in agricultural science.

Sporting facilities and opportunities are abundant in Birchip. There is football, golf, netball, squash, tennis, cricket, hockey and bowls. Birchip Business and Learning Centre also offers a range of sports and exercise programs, on a needs basis, and is currently offering an extensive array of classes in body bar, pilates, weights on wheels, indoor hockey and body ball.

Birchip school is a prep to year 12 school. It is a small school with approximately 225 students, with 35 teachers and support staff. It has extensive facilities including sporting facilities, a gymnasium, approximately 120 computers, a joint-use school community library, and the usual array of school amenities. It is a very friendly and safe community to live and raise a family.

It is important for the future of rural communities that they remain reactive and vibrant, and are places where all people can flourish and enjoy a good quality of life. Funding for programs needs to be flexible and relevant for people living in rural communities and the different needs due to low population, isolation and minimal public transport.

Neighbourhood houses and learning centres work in local communities building the capacity for inclusion and empowerment, community interaction, lifelong learning, pathways into education and employment, improving health, wellbeing, resilience and cohesion. The range of programs provided is extensive and we are able to react quickly to changing needs within a community. We offer a range of programs that will enhance the quality of life and the perception of country life. The programs try to redress the lifestyle that young people could enjoy in metropolitan cities. However, neighbourhood houses cannot continue to respond to community needs without realistic funding from the state government.

Increased funding to ensure neighbourhood housing and learning centres continue to provide activities and opportunities for local communities is needed. Adult community and further education provides funds to support the development of adult community and further education in the state. However, the learning needs of people living in rural communities are quite different to those living in communities where they have access to TAFES, universities, private training providers and history training providers.

While our participants may be employed or engaged in school — factors that exclude them from being eligible for ACFE-funded places — they still require ACFE-funded places to ensure courses and upgrades are accessible and affordable as we do not have the population base to provide cost-effective courses in rural communities. The only way it is feasible for employers or schools to provide their employees or VET and VCAL students with individualised and relevant training is if it is subsidised by ACFE. Employers and schools in rural communities do not have large cohorts requiring the same training as their city counterparts, and they are not next door to TAFEs. Also, what ACFE considers is vocational training is not always relevant to rural ACFE providers. Over the current three years ACFE is reducing its funding to providers by 60 per cent, and there is concern among the ACFE sector that courses will have to be provided by a registered training organisation in the future, which will exclude small ACFE providers like the ones situated in rural communities.

Local learning and employment networks are another Victorian government initiative that is working very well in our area. The North Central LLEN brings together education providers, industry, community organisations and individual and government organisations to improve education, training and employment outcomes for young people in our communities. It ensures that all of these people work together providing more awareness and better outcomes for young people. It is also another program that relies heavily on government funds that are not recurrent, therefore jeopardising the overall success of this program.

FReeZA provides drug and alcohol-free entertainment that is organised by young people for young people. It has a twofold effect of providing young people with entertainment opportunities that are very limited in rural areas, and also provides these young people with the skills required to organise these events. This is also a year-by-year funding program that makes forward planning difficult. These are all issues that will affect rural communities and how they can support young people. Ultimately it will be employment opportunities that determine where people will reside. We have to promote a stronger and more positive image of life in rural towns to ensure that people want to remain or return, and we need to have opportunities.

The importance of water to the whole Mallee district cannot be understated, and obviously the town is facing issues related to the drought. Economic and employment opportunities are seriously impacted upon and also recreation. Tchum Lake South, only 8 kilometres from town, used to offer camping facilities, a sandy beach, a great lake for skiing and fishing, and the northern part of the lake was a haven for many species of birds. The Wimmera–Mallee pipeline will have huge benefits in this regard.

I was concerned with the terms of reference, that they were quite narrow, that they concentrated on encouraging young people to remain or return to their rural towns and communities. I am encouraged that some of our young people move away to be educated and trained and hope that they will consider living in the country in the future, whether it be the local town they grew up in or another rural town. I hope we have provided our youth with a wide range of activities and experiences so that they appreciate life in the country is fruitful and enjoyable and they will be encouraged to live in the country in the future — whether it be the town they grew up in or another.

It is important that rural communities attract a wide range of people, including families which are large consumers of education, health care, local businesses and services; retirees and young people, both who have grown up locally and from further afield. We need to promote a positive image of life in the country. We often sell the disadvantaged stories — the tough times, the hard times — but there are many positive aspects of living in the country that we need to sell, to ensure we attract all sorts of people to small rural towns and communities. The cost of living is much less, the price of housing, the freedom for children, the safety and the sense of community.

Many professional jobs like teachers pay the same salary if you are working in Richmond or Birchip, but a similar house in Birchip would be a quarter of the cost, if there was one available, which is another story, and obviously you have heard it today. Thank you.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much, Simone, for the time and effort you have put in today.

**Mr WALSH** — The issue of flexible funding, everyone says it — can you give us some examples where funding has been inflexible to achieve the outcome you wanted?

**Ms CHRISTIE** — That is where our neighbourhood house program funding is so good. They use the term ‘community development’ and therefore anything our community considers important we can pursue; whereas an ACFE program, for example, is very inflexible in that you have to deliver X amount of hours for

students, and it has to be in a course that they consider vocational. They may consider a computer course vocational but in Birchip there are probably three computer operators, so that is the problem.

And programs like VET in schools is also difficult in that if you have a TAFE next door, it is okay because the kids can go to TAFE, but when you have to send kids on the bus to Horsham, funding does not cover travel so our needs are different sometimes.

**The CHAIR** — You also talked about the eligibility of some people to actually partake in active courses. Can you expand a bit more on that?

**Ms CHRISTIE** — In ACFE they have areas where people can fit in to be a funded place, and if you are a full-time student you do not qualify; if you are employed you do not qualify. So you have to be unemployed looking for work, and there are not a whole lot of those in our area. Most of them may be underemployed, but they are technically employed.

**The CHAIR** — So funded places are only for vocational places, are they?

**Ms CHRISTIE** — Yes, the hobby courses that come with the neighbourhood house program, so it is fee for service.

**The CHAIR** — And what vocational courses are you able to offer at Birchip?

**Ms CHRISTIE** — We have run some computer courses, first-aid, earlier this year we ran a shearing and wool handling course, a farm chemical users course, those sorts of things.

**The CHAIR** — And you are obviously saying that you would be able to run more courses because you would have more people who would be able to take part.

**Ms CHRISTIE** — Not necessarily more vocational courses, because what we are finding is that people are fully employed, but in order to live in the country and have a good quality of life, they like to be able to do a wellbeing course or a health course, and that does not fit within the ACFE-funded environment.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you again, Simone. You will get a copy of the transcript in about two weeks and you may correct any errors but you cannot change matters of substance.

**Witness withdrew.**