

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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Witnesses

Pastor M. A. Russell, Uniting Church, Donald.

Mr J. Goldsmith.

The CHAIR — We are now up to the time for taking comments from the floor. I am aware that some people would like to make a presentation.

Margaret, for the record, would you mind giving us your name, the organisation you represent and your position within that organisation? You do not need to take an oath or make an affirmation.

Pastor RUSSELL — My name is Margaret Anne Russell, and I am a pastor with the Uniting Church in Donald. Thank you for these few minutes. For a community to be viable and an attractive option for anyone, including youth, we believe it needs access to housing, employment opportunities, good educational facilities and a core of skilled people — such as in health and education. It needs to be environmentally attractive — clean and green, with water. There needs to be access to services and shops and access to some sort of cultural focus, like beaches, lakes, mountains and the arts — something in that area — and to some security and some social capital, such as groups to belong to in order to become part of a community.

A lot of this has been addressed, but one of the issues that we are seeing is the rationalisation of services into major areas. That really impacts on the feeling of security for young families. If you cannot get an X-ray in your local town or you cannot see a medical specialist, you can travel to do it — but there are a lot of issues around that, including the time it takes and the money it takes, particularly now with the increased cost of fuel. We were very impressed with the shire's proposal that there be a reduction in HECS debts for graduates who are prepared to work in country areas. It will need more than that, of course. There will need to be changes in the funding of health services, I believe, so that they are not so encouraged to draw it all back into major centres and they are subsidised to provide services to some degree out into more rural areas.

As to activities for school-aged people, we heard about some of them earlier. Particularly highlighted were young people who are not interested in the major sports that are played in the area. Around this area I have noticed that there is quite a lot of disappointment, I guess, about the loss of recreational and pleasure activities, with the loss of water and 11 out of 12 local lakes being dry. I am not positive how related this is to issues — we certainly have an increased awareness of them — in relation to drugs, alcohol and self-harm, particularly in the 12 to 18-year-old group and more so at the lower end of that.

The lack of regular public transport and increasing fuel prices limit access to activities for young people, as well as to medical services and things like that. There could be a community vehicle, not limited to home and community care (HACC) clients and auspiced through a local organisation, that could be driven by volunteers and where you could pay a driver if you needed to do that. It could be like a low-cost taxi service that was free to go where people needed to go. I do not know how many of you have been to Vanuatu, but the taxis there are just amazing. There are no buses. You catch a taxi, and it goes wherever — a first on, last off, sort of business. We need to be looking at something like that in rural areas.

A lot of other activities that are accessible to young people and older people in larger areas can be run on a commercially viable basis. A gymnasium that offers tai chi, aerobics and all those sorts of things would not be commercially viable in a small country area, so there needs to be some way that we can organise to subsidise something like that. I do not think people should get anything for free — I think it is good for people to pay towards the cost of things they enjoy — but nobody is going to set up something like that in a remote rural area, because there is not the volume to go through. Yet young people and older people still need to be able to engage in those sorts of activities.

There is something we are doing that you might be interested in. The Uniting Church is currently in the planning phase of forming a partnership with the Shire of Buloke to jointly fund and provide governance for a youth worker to work across the whole of the Buloke shire. Previously the shire has had funding for a youth worker for two days a week. That is not a viable option either. What youth worker is going to stay here working for two days a week? As soon as a job comes up that offers them four or five days, they are going to move on. Part-time, specialised work does not work very well in remote rural areas either.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. Are there any other people who would like to contribute?

Mr GOLDSMITH — Yes, I would.

The CHAIR — Please come forward and state your full name and address.

Mr GOLDSMITH — My name is James Goldsmith, of [ADDRESS REMOVED] Birchip. I am just putting a personal point of view. What comes through from a lot of people is that social isolation seems to be one of the prohibiting factors stopping youth from remaining in rural towns. I personally believe technology has the capacity to have a major impact on this.

I will tell you a little story about my kids. I have one son who is 21 years old, and for the last three years he has been travelling to America to teach waterskiing during the winter. The first year he went he would ring us up, and we would talk to him for 10 minutes or so. We had really big phone bills by the end of the year, and we missed him heaps while he was away. The second year we set it up so we could talk to him by video conference over the Internet. We would hop on, and if he was online we would know he was online, and we would talk to him because we had arranged to do it. It did not seem like he was away at all. When you actually saw him and heard him at the same time you felt like he could just have been in the next town; it really did not make any difference. The third year we were not as well organised and we got back to ringing up again, and it was the same thing — we missed him a fair bit.

It might have been a fluke, but my wife and brothers and sisters all said the same thing: for some reason it just did not seem like he was a long way away. What I am suggesting is that if technology like that were commonly available to people, maybe it would be a lot easier for them to live in places like this, because they could just call up. I imagine in 10 years time it will be commonly available, but at the moment it is not. In our shire all the larger population towns have optic fibre to their exchanges, so probably 80 per cent of the people in the shire have the option. If the government subsidises it somehow or other to give us high-speed broadband access, it would be quite easy for all that to happen for everyone, whenever they wanted. I am sort of pushing high-speed broadband because I think it will help a lot. It will provide the opportunity for more jobs for professionals and stuff like that. That is all I want to say. I think we will get it in 10 years anyway, so why not help us lead the fight?

The CHAIR — Are there are further comments from the floor? Thank you all very much for your interest today. We will now adjourn.

Committee adjourned.