

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Bairnsdale — 23 May 2006

Members

Mr B. P. Hardman

Mr R. G. Mitchell

Mr C. Ingram

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman

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Witness

Ms S. Kendall, Chair, Gippsland East LLEN (affirmed).

Mr J Ireland, Committee Member, Gippsland East LLEN (affirmed)

The CHAIR — Welcome, Sally and John. 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 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, hearing evidence today on the inquiry into retaining and attracting back young people to country Victoria. Welcome, Sally and John and everybody who has come along today. Could you please state your full name and address and, if you are representing an organization, advise what your position within that organization is and also please take an oath or affirmation?

Ms KENDALL — Sally Ann Kendall, [ADDRESS REMOVED] Bairnsdale representing Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLEN) and I am the chair of the board..

Mr IRELAND — John Charles Ireland, [ADDRESS REMOVED] Bairnsdale, representing the board of the Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLEN).

The CHAIR — Thank you. Your evidence will be taken down and will become public evidence in due course. Could you please make your statement and put in your comments, and we will have some questions for you following that.

Ms KENDALL — The Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Networks has submitted a written submission to this inquiry some weeks ago, so my comments are really drawing on that with a little bit more detail but still based on that written submission. But I will just restrict myself to firstly young people who do leave their own rural community and in particular three groups. Firstly, it is developmentally important for young people to individuate from their family in some way. In rural areas many do this by moving to the metropolitan area and developing their own lifestyle, geographically separate from their family and from their community and it is usually to study and work. I think that it is a right of passage almost which is commonly understood by many young people living in rural areas. Usually that works out quite well, but then there are times when young people get to the metropolitan area they do not have the usual support systems and networks there. So it is a bit of a struggle for them to get on their two feet and they return. So I will come back to that group in a minute.

Secondly, others go to the metropolitan area because they feel as though they do not fit into smaller communities and I think this is an important consideration. For some reason they feel different and their peers and others can persecute them. Although I am representing the Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Network, I also work with young people, children and adolescents with mental health issues. So part of my comments are also drawn from my experience there. Smaller communities do not always embrace diversity. So many young people believe that a perceived difference within themselves, or their experience in some way and it could be some specific interests they hold, sexual orientation, for example, or some kind of significant aspect of their own history which is public knowledge, means that they can end up feeling conspicuous. They feel like by being in a metropolitan area they can be more anonymous. I think this is important because we need to keep in mind that retaining these young people requires an attitudinal shift in rural communities, beyond that of simply a regional economic development approach to the problem and I would like that to be kept very much in mind.

Thirdly, some young people from remote towns can only, even within a region, can only access post secondary educational training, by relocating somewhere else within their own region. It still entails moving away from their own smaller community. For example, Canberra, Benambra, Yarram to access and complete a TAFE course would usually require moving from their own community. So for example, a whole lot of things immediately become an issue there, but especially transport.

Some descriptors of young people who leave. Thinking then about attracting young people back to rural community. A community needs to be actively promoting a future workforce with needs for young people while they are doing early career planning at school. We need to be able to get to them reliable information about projected skill levels and employment opportunity in their own community in about five or 10 years time, so that they can factor that information into their early decisions about their career planning. These projections could be based on current age profiles of workforce and that kind of stuff, but if they have got that information, they know

that it is reliable information, then they can use it in a way that could actually put them on a pathway to moving to back to their own area. I think the local government could play an integral role in developing those projections.

Secondly, I am aware anecdotally of quite a few young people who have left their community, I have just mentioned, and then they do return about six or 18 months later because living in the city has not worked out for them and it might be because of homesickness, being disconnected, inadequate levels of financial and personal support and stress of the relocation. The culmination of these things can actually mean that they return with some real mental health issues. But it also means that there is a bit of a gap in the support they can access in finding employment once they get back. They might not fit into the disadvantage groups that can access existing transition services. They do not fit into the group who can access careers counselling at schools, that kind of stuff. So I think that is an opportunity for a group that we could really get a lot of benefit from having in our community, if we supported them better once they moved back.

Finally, government policy and rural communities need to strategically plan to attract all young people to the area because I think a lot of times and certainly where young people who have left this area, trained, worked, got experience in the city, but then moved to another regional area in Victoria for employment. I think what you lose on the swings you gain on the roundabout, but we could put some more thought into how to make the most of that opportunity as well, including making professional career development possible for young people who work in the rural areas, catering for their social needs, and possibly financial incentives for them to relocate to rural areas. Finally, just being able to have access to accurate data describing the leave and return patterns for young people in rural communities, within our region, would help improve our understanding of the trends in movements of young people, in our region, but also around the State. Where they going? Why they are going? Why they return? Then that data could inform our local strategic planning. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you Sally.

Mr IRELAND — I want to focus on a different group of young people, if you like, to focus on a different group of young people, those who would choose to remain if it is possible and what we can do support those young people. They are people who are going to be looking to further their education locally, not always an easy thing to do. We do have quite a good TAFE college here, but it is based in Bairnsdale and there are also major campuses at Forestech and down at Lakes Entrance in the maritime industry. TAFE has gone a certain way to providing flexible learning but actually being able to provide more flexibility in their training so that they can deliver to young people where they are and to make that training relevant to local industry. One that screams out to me is the gas industry. We are about to connect many thousands of houses to gas, and I have not seen a training program for young people to be involved in that, happen. There are probably going to be people brought in from outside. I do not know if we have enough gasfitters to do the job locally. So it will probably be people from elsewhere.

There is also a need, as Sally hinted at, to promote what is going on locally to young people and to an extent the Local Learning and Employment Network has done that through what they call, Try Out Trade days, where local tradesman strut their stuff. Young people have a look at what opportunities might be in that industry. But I think that is an area we could go much further in, in actually finding out what jobs are available locally. The big issue for me, has been for a long time, the recognition of the role of local, state and commonwealth government departments and government funded agencies in providing employment and work experience for young people. The smaller the community the bigger they are as players. Now most of our businesses in East Gippsland, earn less than \$50,000 a year. Just on 50% of them earn less than \$50,000, now that is not a micro business, that's a nano business. That is so small that they have no capacity. When the Commonwealth government's definition of a small business is 200 employees, I do not know what that makes these things. They are mum and dad businesses really. Whereas the big employers in town are the government departments. They are the department of conservation, they are the schools, they are the police, they are the health services, they are the other community services. They are the funded agencies that are funded by government to do things.

We have recommended in our submission that it be considered to actually make it a part of somebody's performance indicator. To make the head of a government agency, part of his performance indicator, or her performance indicator to include 5% of their workforce must be locally recruited trainees or something similar. I would not like to try and define the number, but to actually put a ratio on it. The other thing is to have an incentive or an obligation to contractors who are employed for major capital works, to look to employ locally. You make that a part of the conditions of the contract. I am not sure how much flexibility there is in letting contracts legally to do that, but I think it should be done.

Mr INGRAM — I will start. Sally and John, within the submission you have pointed out a few strategies that may be considered. There are a few of them I think that are some good ideas there. The first one that access to the independent youth allowance is automatic in rural areas, I would like you to expand on that. That is one of the issues that has come up fairly regularly throughout – not the solution but the problems. So if you would like to expand on why and how that would be done, in your view?

Ms KENDALL — Well young people can access the independent youth allowance if they earn a certain amount of income within a 12 month period. That means that it interrupts the transition from school into further education, if indeed that is what they are planning to do. So in some cases, it is an interruption. In other cases I am not saying that that is therefore negative in every case. But it is a problem because accessing further education does, in a rural area, require moving away and living independently. But to qualify for the independent youth allowance, even though you might be living independently is not always possible. So because young people in rural areas do have to move away then it should be easier for them to access this independent youth allowance, without having to interrupt the pathway. So I think that that needs to be looked at. It costs more.

Mr INGRAM — That is one of the issues that came up, the cost on families from young areas, and the fact that there is a large portion of students defer a year simply to try and qualify for the independent youth allowance. That is a solution. So you means test that on the parents?

Mr IRELAND — The youth allowance already exists. I am not sure on the details of this, actually I should ask my daughter, she would know more about it than I would. The youth allowance already exists, the independent living allowance is a separate, or a bigger youth allowance if you like. To actually include the independent as being an automatic right of a rural young person, if they qualify for the youth allowance, then they qualify for the independent living allowance.

Mr INGRAM — If they are living away from home?

Mr IRELAND — Yes.

Ms KENDALL — There needs to be greater acknowledgement financially of the cost in young people having to move away from their own community to access employment experience and further training and education and within the current policy structure, the independent youth allowance is the obvious one. But there could be another solution to that, but there needs to be a greater financial recognition of the cost of doing that. Some families, parents are working in a rural area and supporting three students, or young people in Melbourne, so effectively supporting four different households financially, which is a huge burden. There needs to be some recognition of that.

Mr IRELAND — It is estimated that the cost of that, and I have seen estimates from \$12,000 to \$20,000 a year to keep a young person just alive in Melbourne, without university fees and that sort of thing.

Ms KENDALL — When the parents cannot provide that support which is reasonable, then it does sometimes mean that young people move back feeling as though they've failed. That is no reflection on them personally, but that's how they take it quite often and that is a problem.

The CHAIR — John, you spoke about flexibility of TAFE provision especially in distance areas, and it is obviously an issue that's dear to my heart as well. I was wondering what do you see the barriers for TAFE being flexible and how do we overcome those barriers?

Mr IRELAND — As I said the East Gippsland Institute of TAFE has a history of working very hard to provide flexible training. I think that there are some areas certainly where young people have to go away to do block release things, I think that they could be looked at. Maybe it may be possible to do more workplace assessment stuff for those young people and to actually have them assessed in the town that they are in. It is an area that really needs looking at I think rather than have any specific trade areas. I know that certainly as I said, East Gippsland TAFE has had a long history of attempting to provide into small communities, but not a lot of that has gone into this sort of apprentice level area, a lot of that is still very hide bound traditional. Perhaps it's just an area that needs more examination and that just may provide more opportunities in small communities.

Mr MITCHELL — I just want to go back to the bit you raised about young ones coming back into the community and feeling as if they are a failure. Everywhere we have gone we have heard that, and it is a pretty sad sort of thing to come up constantly. What sort of support mechanisms have you got available at the moment you can deal with to help them fit back in the community?

Ms KENDALL — The way I understand it, is if they generally speaking, if they fit a disadvantaged criteria then they can access things like, youth pathways and poems and things like that. So there are certainly possibilities for some young people. But if it is a young person who has been away – like schools will provide support for six months after finishing VCE. But if it's 12 months after finishing VCE they are not eligible for that and if they are not eligible for any of the disadvantaged or the transition services that are designed to cater for young people in disadvantaged groups, then there is a gap and that is a problem and I think that needs to be highlighted through this inquiry.

Mr MITCHELL — Is it a social problem?

Ms KENDALL — It certainly can be because young people return feeling as though they have failed and they are making these comments – I am drawing on my work as a child and adolescent mental health worker – and that can be a devastating experience for young people because they tend to focus on peers who have moved out of the community and who have moved into positions overseas, get noted in the paper for wonderful jobs and they may try and align themselves with that and it really increases their sense of failure.

Mr INGRAM — One of the other recommendations you have put in there is to increase the number of pre -apprenticeship programs and to address skill shortage areas and to expanding funding sources to cover all RTO's and not just TAFE. A bit of expansion on that if you could and particularly in light of the Australian Technical College's funding within the area and where they all fit and probably also knowing how important the TAFE colleges are to country areas. So if you would like to expand on that it is probably not covered to that detail.

Mr IRELAND — I guess it is just a reflection on the resources that are available, I think there is a perception that they could be expanded. The role of the new technical college I have yet to see. It is still very early times. Sally are you closer to that than I am? Neither of us have had much to do with that. The LLEN got involved to set up the conversation to start with and then stepped away and the college has now taken it's own direction.

Mr INGRAM — My understanding is that most of the courses through there will be school based apprenticeship type models, so I assume that fits in with what you are saying here.

Mr IRELAND — That is one area of pre-apprenticeship training. School based apprenticeships aren't being taken up as much as we would like them to be. I don't know what the reasons for those are. Whether it's the employers feel that they haven't got enough of the young person's attention, they are still school students. I do not think the uptake has been as good as it could have been. There have been a number of quite good pre-apprenticeship programs run through the group training companies that I have been aware, that seem to be getting some good results for young people and I guess that is simply a recommendation that we have a look at those and see how they match up to existing skill areas and try and increase the resources there.

Ms KENDALL — One of the things about school based pre-apprenticeships is that they can be very helpful in keeping young people interested and engaged and remaining in education and learning situations. So sometimes the kind of apprenticeship opportunity they might look for is one that satisfies their own interests rather than a skill shortage locally. So there is a bit of a tension between filling local skill shortages on one hand and keeping young people engaged on the other hand. There needs to be more thinking around how those two come together. They are just in terms of outcomes, and the way outcomes are measured as well.

Mr INGRAM — We had Bruce Smith on the agenda for later, but unfortunately he couldn't make it, in relation to the students at work and other things that are going on in the Valley at Omeo, that fairly novel approach they have done up there to address particular issues of lack of employment, after school employment, opportunities of employment in that area. I know John you have got interest in that, do you want to explain that process?

Mr IRELAND — That came from a conversation that a couple of us were having with a group of young people at the school, and the kids said what we need in this town is a Macas, and we sort of rolled our eyes and said yes, you need a Macas. But they said, no, Macas employ kids and we cannot get proper jobs. From that conversation the program grew. Once again the micro-nano industries that are up there do not employ people. They

are far too small to take on, and they do not need extra staff. The young people were saying to us up there, we can leave school and never, ever have had a proper job by the time we leave school. We have done work experience and four weeks here or there. We've never actually had a job where we get money and we go there every week. There was some sponsorship available through Kilmany, I think, a charitable organization that were looking to address something in the community.

The hospital put some resources into an employ a co-ordinator and the program was set up so that businesses were subsidised and it was a negotiable subsidy from a small percentage to a very big percentage, depending on how hard the business could negotiate, subsidised to employ young people. They could get a proper job, that would be advertised. They would fill out a resume, a job application, they would have an interview, and they would have a proper job and they would go to work every Friday night or Saturday morning, whatever it was, as kids can do in a town the size of Bairnsdale. Have a job, outside school, and an opportunity they would not otherwise been able to have. That program started I think about four years ago and it is still going now. It has come very close to going under because it is depended on a constant input of money. The position at the hospital is fine, it is the actual money to negotiate the wages that is been the issue. At the moment it is still floating and if Bruce was here, he could tell you what the lifespan of it is at the moment. It has been down to a few days at some stages. But money seems to have been found at the critical points. It is a very innovative program to tackle that issue and seems to have been very well received.

The CHAIR — Sally, you also brought up about the second topic of youth with regard to those who feel that they do not fit in, in a rural community and they move away. It might be because they are same sex attracted or have mental health problems and you were saying that what is required there is an attitudinal change in rural communities. This is not the first time, it is probably the third time or so, that this has been raised. Could you tell us about how we might go about involving people, or creating that attitudinal change to people who may be a little bit different in a rural community? How do we work on that? How do we make people aware?

Ms KENDALL — It is complicated is it not? But look I don't have detailed knowledge of some of the community capacity building that's being done. But from the knowledge that I do have I think that that concept could actually be broadened to work in a broader way in some of the small communities. I am a little bit of aware of some of the community capacity in Bruthen, Nowa Nowa, from what I understand I think that concept could be broadened to include some attitudinal stuff around diversity around people. That kind of attitudinal stuff, I think there is some sort of potential to piggyback on the back of that in some way to work through some of those things.

Mr IRELAND — There is also a number of initiatives in education that are heading in that direction at the moment. There is the National State Schools program, there is the VELs program in Victorian schools, Essential Learning Standards and they are really about not what you learn but how you learn it. There is also a big bullying initiative going on at the moment in State government schools. There is another program that runs nationally and I have had a lot of involvement with called Mind Matters. All of these look at what goes on in the schools at the interaction between young people and the environment in which young people are learning. So bullying, harassment are very big issues in those areas. It is not easy, we are starting some of that stuff in some of the schools at the moment. We also have a program that we are running in Lakes Entrance this year for the primary schools and secondary school, which is the Festival for healthy living which is being run in conjunction with the Royal Childrens' Hospital and that is a mental health program for young people in primary and secondary school. So there are a lot of things around that are starting to raise those issues of young people's mental health in schools and the attitude in schools. I think it is in schools that we have to look to address this.

Ms KENDALL — I think it is broader than that. I think we've got to broaden it out.

Mr IRELAND — I think schools are a starting point and schools are certainly somewhere where you have got the young people eight hours a day, for 40 weeks of the year, you can work on that. I am not denying that there are some issues in the broader community. I think if we start at, certainly it is an area that I feel I can be effective in my work, to actually work at that level at schools. It is possible to shift attitudes. Once upon a time smoking was what everybody did. Now smoking is what you do outside and you are one of those funny ones that goes outside and has a fag. Once upon a time if you didn't drive home from the pub drunk on Friday night, you needed a note from your mum to say why. Everybody did it, now nobody does it, not nobody but most people don't, it is socially unacceptable. I think then we have to move that same social change into the bullying and the tolerance area. I will go back to my point, I think we start at schools.

The CHAIR — You also talked about another category of people who come back after a year and a half or a year, or maybe quicker for a variety of reasons. But again you put that group as perhaps also at risk and maybe not having enough support when they get back to rural communities. So what kind of support should be there, is it youth workers as such? What are the kinds of support that do need to be there for those people when they come back maybe not expecting to have done so?

Ms KENDALL — Well there are two sides to that. In some ways they may be at risk initially but I do not think they are necessarily – they are also an opportunity for us to regain young people coming back, so I would not like that point to get lost.

The CHAIR — No I think you are perfectly right. I think you are spot on.

Ms KENDALL — I think they need access initially to career advice. Okay, I am back here, now how do I get a job? Because the existing transition services, because of that gap in the existing transition services it is not always easy. They are not long term unemployed, if they are not indigenous, if they are not disabled, if they are not homeless, it can be hard for them to access advice and help on where they need to go to education relevant to them, training, where they can look for work and support around those things. So I think we need to fill that gap with some earlier intervention.

The CHAIR — John and Sally thank you very much for giving us your time today and for providing your submissions. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about two weeks' time and you may any typographical errors but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.