

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Yarram — 24 May 2006

Members

Mr B. P. Hardman

Mr R. G. Mitchell

Mr C. Ingram

Mr J. M. McQuilten

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman

Deputy Chair: Mr C. Ingram

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms L. Topic

Research Officers: Dr P. Chen, Ms C. Tischler

Witnesses

Mr D Roberts Youth Development Officer, Wellington Shire Council (affirmed).

Ms P Rathnow, Council Trainee Member Maffra Youth Action Team (sworn).

The CHAIR — Welcome. Thank you for joining us today. 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, and 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 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 member. We are hearing evidence today on the inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities.

Could you please give us your full name and address and the name of the organization you represent today, position within that organization and take the oath or affirmation.

Mr ROBERTS — David Roberts, [ADDRESS REMOVED] Traralgon, Wellington Shire Council and I am employed as Youth Development Officer.

Ms RATHNOW — Pauline Rathnow, [ADDRESS REMOVED] Bullen, Wellington Shire, youth training.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much if you can give your evidence as briefly as possible and then we will have some questions after.

Mr ROBERTS — Firstly I would like to say thank you for the opportunity it is great to see Victorian Parliaments looking at the issues of rural young people and actually recognising the differences there compared to our city counterparts. Very briefly the Wellington Shire has a youth population of over 7,000 young people aged between 12–25 which represents about 19% of the total population. These young people are located over an area of almost 11,000 kilometres so quite regionally spread, or rurally spread.

That rural isolation has a major impact on the community with approximately 55% of the young population living in the key towns of Sale, Maffra, Rosedale, Stratford, Heyfield and Yarram. The remaining 45% of the population is based in smaller towns or within farming communities. This rural isolation and population spread impacts greatly on the location of health and welfare services, recreation and cultural facilities and the infrastructure required to support young people in their local towns.

There are a number of barriers obviously for young people living in our rural towns and the first of those is obviously access to sports services. For a range of reasons, rural towns often lack the support services of major centres and metropolitan areas. Young people are left without immediate access to these services and either need to travel large distances to gain access or attend visiting services during limited and inconvenient times. Some services such as youth refuges are located in other communities and access is difficult and becoming a client of these services means relocating from peers and other support networks.

Obviously we have heard employment issues, the lack of employment opportunities, and also at later ages those young people that are looking at returning there is a lack of career development or career options to further their careers. In terms of a further barrier is education. We do not have access to universities, TAFE courses, and some of the courses that are offered locally do not have the flexibility or the diverse range that we have again in Melbourne. Thus giving young people a desire to move.

Again, because of the lack of numbers in our local communities, the social, cultural and recreation opportunities available are limited and young people do not have access to those same services that our metropolitan counterparts have in terms of entertainment and recreation. Young people then revert to private parties or other activities.

Transport is obviously the key and the biggest and most central barrier to young people achieving their full potential in rural communities. Isolated young people are disadvantaged by a lack of mobility caused by extremely limited public transport that is often expensive and operates outside of young people's timeframes, so no weekends or nightly transport. We have recently done a questionnaire or survey to a number of young people and one young person as stated:

I have lived in a rural area my entire life, at times feeling particularly isolated as I live at least half an hours drive from most of friends and my school. This has meant missing out on many social opportunities, as sometimes it is just not logistically possible for me to get there.

The lack of mobility impacts on all aspects of a young people's life and experiences in rural community. Access to support services, as we mentioned, the recreational activities that are in other communities, young people cannot get there. Of course employment and educational opportunities and there is a limited access to buses to get to traineeships and to get to TAFE. Another young person has stated:

There needs to be better public transport in country areas. It's almost impossible to get around if you don't have a car, so for all the people under 18,. They feel stuck in their town and find it hard to get out to see friends or even visit Melbourne. Lots of young people hitch hike because it's the only way to get around. There needs to be more frequent buses between towns in regional areas, and late buses for people going out. V-line trains also need to be cheaper. For \$10 I can get around on public transport in Melbourne across all zones ALL DAY but on V-line, that gets me from Sale to Rosedale.

How young people deal with these barriers greatly impacts on their perception of the community and a willingness or likelihood to remain or return to the rural town. Young people often feel trapped, probably as we heard a little bit earlier trapped in their community and need to look at other opportunities. Sometimes this is a motivational force in encouraging young people to finish their secondary school and to move to further education or employment.

Those young people that stay are often disengaged and with a sense of helplessness and failure. One young person was stated:

I think most people who have moved away for study see moving back as a step backwards, like they haven't been a success and have to come back with their tail between their legs.

This community perception can be dangerous both for those young people that do return and for those young people who choose to stay and there are obviously some legitimate reasons to stay. Young people choose to stay in their local communities, obviously for family, social support and often do find meaningful work here. Those young people that do remain should be seen as valuable resources in our community and given opportunities to be valuable community members.

In terms of the community impact on young people leaving, one of the things that we have certainly noticed in the past is that it has a major impact on some of our community groups. One such group was the Maffra Youth Action Team that Pauline will briefly talk about.

Ms RATHNOW — The Maffra Youth Action Team began in 2004 with the support of the school nurse who invited a group of 12 interested young people to meet for a general discussion. As a group of young people concerned about our peers we discussed the general question of what is important to us. As a result of this first meeting we formed an action committee to look at the gap between the local youth and the local health providers.

The group has been operating successfully with great outcomes for the past three years. The projects that we have undertaken include: A health services expo day, a health forum, producing and distribution youth cards, producing and distributing privacy posters, a second follow up forum, a presentation to the DHS Rural Health Conference. As a group of young people we have undertaken leadership roles in each project and organised key actions as part of completing these tasks.

The group is currently looking at two projects, an Ask the Nurse segment on the web site and a pamphlet to assist and prepare young people to attend the doctors. In the last six months it has been hard to continue these projects as many of the members have left the town due to employment and further education. Of the original 12 member group, six left last year for university in either Melbourne or interstate, one is at TAFE in Lakes Entrance, one has left for work in Melbourne and living with friends who are in tertiary education, one is working locally and will attend university at the end of this year, one is working in child care, one is unemployed and I have gained a local traineeship in Youth and the Arts.

Many of these members are unlikely to return to Maffra in the future and have ceased their involvement in the action team. While we have recruited three new members, it has been difficult to continue with the same motivation and enthusiasm created when the original group was together. The members who have left have taken their experiences and skills with them.

Mr ROBERTS — I think that is an important factor that those young people who do leave as a community building, or community strengthening project we lose a lot of those skills and certainly it is hard to gain. If we look again at our counterparts in metropolitan regions often those people can access employment,

access further training in their community, and therefore stay engaged within that community and maintain their role as a volunteer or as a leader.

The CHAIR — I would like to ask Pauline a question just from there because I have sort of seen similar things happening in other towns, and if you look back when you started the action team and the enthusiasm and motivation behind it all. Was there a significant mentor in there that helped you get that going, or did it just come from within the leadership qualities of your own group? If you were going to do that again, do you see a way that maybe it could be a more sustainable youth action team could have happened if you were starting the process over?

Ms RATHNOW — To answer the first question, I guess it came from both sides. We did have Chris Rush who was fantastic and the group was enthusiastic about everything we did, we were full of life and everything like that, so it was a bit of both.

The CHAIR — Is Chris still there?

Ms RATHNOW — No, she has left. Probably a more sustainable way to do it is to look at targeting younger kids, like year 6 maybe year 7 getting them into the group and then we have a couple of years with them to maintain that and then keep going back.

The CHAIR — So you think even when we start these things up it is important to get mentoring going from young people to younger people?

Ms RATHNOW — Yes.

Mr ROBERTS — How are we going for time?

Mr INGRAM — I think we should probably go to questions, unless you have anything else to add.

Mr ROBERTS — I will just go straight to the end. In terms of some considerations that we would like to put forward, there are some social support programs such as young farmers and young professions that are important to many aspects and that create connectedness with the community both with those young people who remain in our communities as well as those that return to regional communities. These programs have operated in Wellington Shire, and there are some successful young farmers here in Yarram. We have tried to establish a young professionals group in Sale.

Also more generalist support to young people in terms of looking at engaging young people in their communities in a meaningful way, trying to get young people engaged in decision making, community processes and delivery of social and recreational pursuits. Again getting young people to invest in the community often will attract young people to come back, a positive experience. Support for transitional processes, again there was in the past programs that support young people in moving to Melbourne and again this would be positive to actually encourage those young people back and look at some transition and how do those young people re-engage back in their communities on their return, or in the cases of areas of where there are hospitals and things like, often where engaging or returning other young people back into the communities how do they engage when they have not come from that community in the first place as a young people.

I think we need to encourage rural living as an option and that is partly around that perception as well, but it is a good place to live and does have some benefits. In terms of employment one of the recommendations there is to continue to develop government initiatives that create jobs in rural towns through encouraging businesses to relocate, looking at what incentives we can offer in terms of rates, tax cuts et cetera. Also looking at developing links with young people prior to leaving for further education. These type of things we could look at vocational work when young people return from university on holidays, work placements, mentoring, cadetships, scholarships that businesses may offer and then they are repaid through that young people returning to work for that organization or an upfront commitment from employers to actually employ that young people when they do return to that community and that would be partnered with looking at what school shortages are in communities et cetera.

In terms of education it may be looking at flexible delivery of university courses so young people can remain in rural towns. Obviously we could look at internet delivery, block training for university courses where a young person may go away for a month and then be supported back in terms of local communities to actually continue

that study. Involved there could be links with local schools, TAFE, Adult Education and Neighbourhood Houses, encourage them to be more involved.

Transport as we mentioned before is to expand the options available to young people there looking at whether there can be taxi voucher schemes, car pooling, increased bus routes for social activities as well as improved transport for accessing university, TAFE and employment. Accessing to school buses there has been an issue in the past. An improved transport access to Melbourne via increased services and reduced costs allowing young people would be able to have greater opportunities to Melbourne would encourage young people possibly to stay in their local community because they have greater access to those other opportunities.

Two things in conclusion there, one is that we need to look at a coordinated planning approach in most of those solutions and encourage the community to be actively involved as well as government departments. Just a quick quote from an adult who has returned and responded to our questionnaire and they say:

For me it was the love of the environment, the mountains, the sea, the farms and the recreational opportunities that goes along with that environment, fishing, hunting, four wheel driving, skiing etc. My wife on the other hand really wants to leave the country as she prefers cafes, shopping, galleries, theatre, markets and groovy cutting edge culture that is the domain of urban living.

Mr McQUILTEN — Get a divorce.

Mr ROBERTS — That's another inquiry.

Mr INGRAM — I know some of the councils have been fairly proactive in employing apprentices and trainees and saying that they have got a leadership role in that. Some of the evidence yesterday was that government departments are not holding their end of the bargain in that and it really is up to government to show leadership socially, have you a comment?

Mr ROBERTS — Yes certainly my portfolio this year is to develop a charter for young people internally. We are looking at as a council how we deal with young people that is looking at a commitment to employing young people and where we can actually make a statement about how many trainees we can take on per year. But going further than that around how we actually deal with young people, we are looking at establishing a range of community representative groups. We need to make a commitment to the community and to young people that we encourage them to be involved in that. We need to have a process involved with how we deal with young people over issues like skateboard parks. There has been issues around how council listens to young people, we want to come out with a document and a statement about what our commitment to young people is and that employment of young people would be part of that.

Mr INGRAM — What about the wider government, both state and federal agencies who work in country areas do not seem to have that same commitment any more as they used.

Mr ROBERTS — For sure I think as you mentioned I think that is where leadership comes in that I think we need to have some target or key performance areas where some of those departments actually take on a target for how many young people they will employ every year. I think that will then develop that economic ability I guess for those young people who live in their own community, work and further develop that economic culture.

The CHAIR — David and Pauline thank you very much for coming along today, putting your evidence and putting so much time into your submissions. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about two weeks time and you may correct any typographical errors but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.