

# 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

Ms N R Carder, Youth Services Officer, Latrobe City Council (affirmed) and,

Ms H M Farley, Coordinator Community Development, Latrobe City Council (sworn).

**The CHAIR** — Welcome Nicole and Heather before we begin I have a brief statement to read. 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.

**Ms CARTER** — Nicole Rae Carder, representing Latrobe City Council, home address [ADDRESS REMOVED] Moe.

**Ms FARLEY** — I am Heather May Farley I live at [ADDRESS REMOVED] I am coordinator of Community Development at Latrobe City Council at [ADDRESS REMOVED] Morwell.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks very much if you could please provide your evidence as briefly as possible and then we will have some questions for you after that.

**Ms CARDER** — During the course of working with young people in the Latrobe City area, the issue of retaining young people in our area has been discussed by the youth sector, a wider community, education providers, family employment agencies and young people themselves. The evidence I am providing is based on my 10 years working directly with young people that my role actually entails.

Some of the dot points for why the young people leave, if family members such as parents are required to leave the area for their own employment, the young person really has no option unless they are financially secure themselves, to stay. The limited number of diverse university courses available to students leaving year 12 or returning to study some training is only available in other areas, such as the Police Force, the Defence Force, chiropractic and things like that. A small number of positions for unskilled labour we do not have a lot of positions in manufacturing and factory work in the Latrobe area, they are more likely to get work in Dandenong, and surrounding suburbs and further in to the city.

Young people I have worked with feel that a social acceptance and intolerance of difference, so young people feel they will be more accepted within a larger community, or just in the city in general, such as sexual orientation. Job opportunities for specific fields of employment, such as marine engineering, police force, defence force, chiropractors, and teachers sometimes they are sent wherever work is available. A fresh start and a new life, some young people are able to develop their own identity free from family and peer involvement and some are able to shake off their past negative experiences at school with a clean slate. The lure of the big city, the pace, excitement, culture, diversity and range of new experiences are very appealing to young people who like to have a big occasion, or often frequent buzz. Sporting, culture and music opportunities there are not a lot of opportunities for young people to develop or work in their area of interest in rural areas. For example, a young person's interest in working in music studios or choreography means they would have limited opportunities locally.

Travel times and access to transport, if young people choose to remain in their rural community but attend school or employment in the city, the time involved to travel, which for our area, between three to four hours per day and that is both including up and back, can take it's toll. It rarely leaves time for part time employment which leaves them financially dependent on their families and also the cost of that travel if they do not meet some of the criteria to family.

Just to see the world, the opportunity to travel and experience different cultures and in some families it is offered as a right of passage that young Johnny will go off and travel for the first year and then come back. Apprenticeships and traineeships sometimes are not offered in our area in certain fields. Access to specialist services, so if there are no spots available for the drug and alcohol rehabilitation in our area, they may need to move on and mental health services, some families manage to use private mental health services which are located in Melbourne rather than the public ran one. The belief that they are less or not worthy if they stay in the country and train that their qualifications and their background may not be valued unless they have had that time or stint in the city. Just the variety of jobs there can be higher income for other areas.

At Monash Gippsland we have experienced some courses being moved, such as the outdoor education program from Monash Gippsland to Monash Clayton, that forced the hand of most families and young people that for them just to continue they needed to move. It has also created a bit of lack of trust and uncertainty for young people to select their program and know that they will remain here for a four year degree. Why do they stay? Sometimes it is family and friendship groups, especially young people with issues, problems, whether they be drug or alcohol or mental health issues, they like with services and supports where they are familiar.

Sporting commitments, if the course they are interested in is offered locally and they are successful in accessing it, they will choose to stay close to family, friends and employment if that is offered. We are fortunate that most of the residents within our municipality live within 40 to 45 minutes from Monash University Gippsland campus and the TAFE campus. Gaining employment some young people I spoke while I was preparing for this just said, how can you get a job here, I do not want to stay. Cheaper housing options if they are unemployed, housing in our area is a lot cheaper, so the option of living alone down in Gippsland or having to share with four people for the same amount of money, is more appealing for them.

Medical reasons, access to their support services that they have already engaged with can keep young people local. Open spaces and access to recreation areas, partners, such as boyfriends, girlfriends remaining in an area, and family, personal finances, some can afford the cost of young people attending university at Monash Gippsland but the cost of supporting two households can be unachievable for a lot of families or individuals.

Why do they come back after study and travel? Small business opportunities in rural areas, family connections and friendship groups, job opportunities if they are available in their chosen fields, partners and boyfriends who have remained at home, or that they have met at university and are returning. Cheap housing, raising families, in country areas, familiarity with the area and the people, young people prefer to be around people that they know in their local area and the accessibility to Melbourne that for some of them, it is close enough to duck up for work or if there university course is only a couple of days a week.

Why do they not come back? Sometimes they have met new partners and boyfriends and chose to stay with them. They have formed new friendship groups, they are feeling of acceptance from their new community or friendship groups, that they have not felt in their regional areas. They are just enjoying their new life and everything that is offered to them. Job opportunities in specific fields are more available in other areas, such as I used the example before the chiropractors, most towns have one, there is rarely a big thriving practice of six chiropractors, so just the opportunity to get work, they need to stay. Job opportunities that arise from training or education, they may do placement and find that an organization that they really enjoy working for, they may stay because they have been introduced to that.

No connection with their rural community, they have lost that link over the four to six years, if they have been away they have lost that link there. They do not feel that link any more. If they have a small business some of them do not feel that the IT and communication support is there for them to come back that they are going to be better supported. The lack of support in establishing those links they have been taught if they do go away and come back and want to set up a small business they have already got those links.

I have two examples – I had two young people that were going to attend with us, one is attending his year 12 SACS and the other one has a family illness they have both given me permission to use them as examples. Michael is currently in the last year of his VCE. I have worked with him on our youth council where students have the opportunity to raise issues that are relevant to them and their peers. Michael wishes to remain in the Latrobe Valley. He wants to study pharmacy and work in his local community. He has known since year 10 that this is what he wants to do and has selected his subjects accordingly and has dedicated himself to achieving this goal. He is very disappointed and angry that he is forced to leave his home, family, friends and local area. He needs to leave his sporting groups and local employment in order to follow his dreams. He is also upset about the financial burden he is about to become on his family. He mentioned that “I’m their burden and I’m their problem until I am 25 years old”, referring to the criteria of independence by Centrelink. Even speaking to him this week about this issue, he is still very annoyed and is passionate about more diverse university courses in regional areas. He is not sure whether he will return to the area, but is concerned that he may not find employment as a pharmacist in his local area. Michael’s case is an example of a young person who does not want to leave this area but is forced to because of him pursuing his chosen career.

My other discussion was with Jane and Jane completed her VCE last year. She is a fantastic singer and specialising in opera. She has very strong links to her local community. Jane has been on our youth council and is very active in her area. Jane was disappointed to learn she would be unable to attend university locally and would need to leave the area. She gained entry into the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music and is very proud of herself. She has not been able to reside at home and travel because of the extra hours and commitment. She moves to Melbourne this weekend and is excited but apprehensive. When asked if she will return to Gippsland she said I would like to raise my kids here because I do not want them raised in the city. She was also concerned about whether she will be able to pursue her career here after her training.

**Ms FARLEY** — I was just going to add a couple of items in relation to Latrobe City's perspective and some of the initiatives that we are doing. We have a youth leadership program and we have a youth council and we have employment programs aimed at getting young people giving them experience in council. We also are connected with a lot of other organizations as well giving them employment experiences.

We believe that there are a few opportunities for young people in large organizations, or in many of our organizations and that we need to do a lot more to understand what it means to have a Gen, X or Y in your workplace and how we can support them and understand them a lot better and we have actually had a speaker that has come along and met with the staff and tried to give some insights into that. But we feel we need to do a lot more to understand how we can use young people more effectively in our workplaces as well as provide opportunities, so therefore, we are more likely to attract them and to give them the opportunities that they are looking for in our modern life and workplaces.

We also have scholarships. We attend with Monash University where we have people on a trainee scholarship with some of the very successful students who come with very high marks and they have some work experience during that time and that works well for young people and for the organization in terms of possible recruitment but also giving them some opportunities beyond the norm. I think we need to do a lot more to link them in with our communities and to link them in with other young people and other young people that are perhaps successful. Nicole mentioned that we are concerned that young people feel that they are undervalued unless they go to Melbourne and that they are not of value and that there is not the status and recognition of their skills and abilities and their contribution to society and that we need to do a lot more around what the government has been doing and others in terms of saying that rural communities are a worthwhile place to live and bring up people. But we do not, we orient that towards families but not a lot toward young people and young professionals.

So we do not have good young professional networks, we do not have good support mechanisms for them and ways of them connecting in with other successful and professional people and people who have an eclectic range of I guess experiences, and views that they are looking for in the world. Certainly portable transport and accessibility and schemes around helping subsidised and make it more accessible for people to return on a more regular basis and keep the connections while they are training outside the area. I think it is very important in terms of keeping people, giving them the opportunity to keep linking back to their community, which has been mentioned previously.

So better services to keep them connected, continued support, and support for organizations that are providing the training and often they are lured elsewhere by other organizations from Melbourne who recognise that they have been well skilled. Some of our businesses locally invested millions of dollars in the young people and the training but they really need to have a highly marketable commodity in a global environment and therefore that investment is lost on the community. So businesses need to be encouraged and supported to do that they cannot compete with some of salaries that these people want when they are trained up and we have a lot of young people that are very marketable, that are very skilled and because of their diverse range of experiences they are often very mature and very attractive to a lot of other employers, so they will head off and we often do not see them back, there is not a lot to attract them back.

**Mr INGRAM** — Just briefly, Latrobe City has been at the forefront of the sharp of government changes, privatisation of the SEC, which is partly responsible for the decline in the apprenticeship training right across Gippsland historically there was a large number of very good young people were recruited by the SEC to train as apprentices but also the sharp end of the local government amalgamation which has gone in your area. How does your area deal with those type of policy changes and what has the impact been on the employment of young people?

**Ms FARLEY** — I think the impact has been enormous because people have seen that they do not have a future here. We have got an aging workforce. There are not many opportunities for young people and the range of those opportunities are quite narrow. We had a period where a lot of young people in the old SEC days would leave school and rather than go to university because a job was valued much higher than university. I think that has started to shift around and some of the consequence of that is that people do not see that there is a job here at all. The range is too narrow so people just leave.

Employers - we have a very strong link with a lot of employers and training organizations and there is an effort put in to try and open up more opportunities for young people but we still have a long way to go. We have trouble getting staff in council in a range of fields. We are trying to recruit more younger people and the way we go about that to interest young people. We have internal programs that encourage that and provide those opportunities, but we need to be doing a lot more. A lot of the opportunities that we provide are not terribly savvy for some young people. We have trouble, and we have a real shortage of child care workers, for example, that can be male or female and child and maternal health and the like. We cannot get preschool staff as well. We have got some huge gaps and shortages and we are unable to fill them. They are not as attractive jobs, or savvy, or sexy if you like jobs for young people they see there are more career opportunities and broader opportunities and higher income opportunities in a range of other fields. A lot of those fields are not well represented in a lot of our local industries and business. There has been a loss.

**Ms CARDER** — I have found that it has created a difference in some families and that difference in generations where dad always got a job at the SEC and mum got a job at the bank or wherever until she had kids and then she might go back again and young people do not have that certainty. So now parents are more focusing on, because it has been drummed in their head, you have got to do VCE. Also the involvement of tech schools where a lot of our, predominately boys, but certainly a lot of girls would go to gain that hands on experience ready to move into the workforce, and now they are pigeon holed into VCE or VCAL. VCAL has addressed some of those issues, but their parents have no comprehension on how it is now different. Even when I finished school in 1990, a lot of the boys were lucky enough to get the tail end of the apprenticeships at the SEC, although they had started to dwindle then and some of them are still in that field, or have moved on as self employment, but that was one of the main employers of a lot of our boys.

**Mr MITCHELL** — There is a lot more peer pressure put on kids today that you have got to go and do this and if you do not well?

**Ms CARDER** — That was one the of points that they made, they like living away in Melbourne because the pressure is not there from family and their peers to be a certain way. They are also raised now that you have to be part of the must haves and they are keeping up with the Joneses and they know the only way to achieve that is by income and their parents are telling them you must go to university and the school is telling them you must go to university or find some other way of making that income, to be part of that in group that has iPods, has mobiles, has a brand new car when they leave school. I had a discussion with a young girl the other day about that, that she is getting a brand new car when she turns 18, and the others almost fell over with envy, because they know they will have to work very hard. Sometimes it is motivator, and sometimes it can absolutely plummet them into crashing.

**The CHAIR** — Nicole and Heather thank you very much for talking with us today. 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**