

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Yarram — 24 May 2006

Members

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Ms J Coolidge, Yarram & District Community Health(affirmed) and,
Ms M Mitchell, Yarram District Community Health (affirmed).

The CHAIR — Welcome Jane and Melanie. 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.

Ms COOLIDGE — My name is Jane Coolidge, I am the coordinator of the Youth and Family Services Team at the Yarram & District Community Health Service and I live at [ADDRESS REMOVED] Yarram.

Ms MITCHELL — I am Melanie Mitchell, I am a youth worker here at Yarram District Hospital and I live in [ADDRESS REMOVED] Woodside.

The CHAIR — Thanks Jane and Melanie if you could please give us your evidence for about 10 minutes or so and then we will have some questions for you.

Ms MITCHELL — We would like to begin by acknowledging that there is always going to be young people who leave the area for various reasons, such as travel, study or having a taste of the city life. However this does not mean that you cannot entice these young people to return once they have done what they have to do through increasing opportunities and challenging the perception that rural towns have little future prospects.

It is important that we plant the seed that the prospect of moving back to Yarram in the future, no matter how distant this is, is always a possibility because of the lifestyle opportunities available. We believe a holistic approach is required when looking at the factors surrounding why significant numbers of young people are choosing to move away from rural areas, and what it takes to work towards retaining young people in Yarram. This holistic approach includes changing local young people's perceptions about rural community and discussing whether this matches reality. This approach involves looking at four key factors. Employment opportunities, including education and training and the types of quality available here.

Recreation opportunities including sport, leisure activities, hobbies and other social outlets, such as clubs, committees, festivals and community based programs. Access to and availability of physical and mental health services. Access to and availability of public transport to other major towns and Melbourne. We often hear that the focus on school towns being the negatives surrounding these four areas. For example, there are not enough jobs, there is nothing to do in Yarram in relation to recreation and social opportunities and so forth, or we cannot get to where we need to go. What we are not hearing very often are possible solutions or ways that we can create more opportunities that these perceptions do in fact have some credibility.

As part of my role as youth worker I am obliged to acknowledge that there are some real issues around these four key factors in Yarram for young people and there is a need to work towards making changes and shifting perception and ultimately retaining young people here in Yarram. My position is entirely funded by Yarram District Health Service who sees this as an important asset to the community. In order to do this we have decided that the first step involves learning what is actually available for young people in our community in each of the four areas mentioned earlier and what young people perceive as available. We have embarked on this pathway in the form of completing an initial mapping exercise with the services available, which is part of our submission, followed by a two stage forum process. We plan to complete this process in relation to education, recreation and health this year. The two stage process involves firstly, engaging service providers within that particular sector, and secondly, engaging local youth on the issue and creating discussion around the sector's responses.

From this we can determine where the gaps are and the types of projects, events and or services that are required as suggested by the community including young people to begin to address these gaps. Our first mapping exercise has been completed in relation to education and the first forum has recently been held with employers, and education and training providers supported by the Gippsland East Local Learning Employment Network. This forum

included presentations and current programs and services available for young people and best practice projects that could possibly be run successful in Yarram if they fit the needs of young people and employment and education providers. A workshop was held that involved participants on the training issues engaging other people whether the types of projects presented could address these issues and any other projects and how they see themselves contributing.

General feedback from these from these discussions includes: young people often have unrealistic expectations about employment. There is a lack of subsidised training placements. Transport is an issue for young people accessing employment, education and training, especially those who live in the outlying areas of Yarram. There is a lack of appropriate preparation for young people entering the workforce. For example, appropriate social skills and hands on experience. Access to relevant information and quality localised training and traineeships is an issue for employers. There are limited recreational opportunities for young people and what is available can directly effect their employment, for example, sporting activities clashing, weekend work, and drug and alcohol use and it's affect on young people's work capabilities.

Most employers can be restrictive in what they are able to offer young people. For example, time commitments and operational restrictions. There is a need to target the appropriate young people for positions, such as traineeships and work experience. For example, of what importance or value is the position or work for the young person and young people not doing work experience just for the sake of it. The programs and events identified at the forum that may address some of these needs, include a mentoring program focusing on employment and social skills, interactive careers expos to broaden people's perceptions of the type of careers available in the Yarram district. Subsidised student employment programs to increase many for paid work experience. Offset business ideas to broaden young people's perceptions of employment in the entrepreneur factor and building better relationships between local employers and educational providers through an adopt-a-school program. Many of these programs have been run successfully in Gippsland and we believe that with the amount of support generated from the forum they could run successfully in Yarram.

Our next step is to create further discussion with young people about acceptances and to work on how we could go about the implementation of the required programs, events or services which have been identified through this process together with the local community. Work has already started on the recreation mapping exercise and this will be followed by health. Transport is an issue that has a huge impact on the education, recreation and health areas in all rural communities and is currently being looked quite intensely by Wellington Shire Council. We will be involved in this issue in a different context. There is always going to be a certain number of young people who leave the area for various reasons, such as travel or to have a taste of the city life, but it does not mean that we cannot entice these young people to return once they have done what they have to do through increasing opportunities and challenging the perception that Yarram is a dead-end.

We realise that we have a long road ahead of us but we are quite confident that change can be made where larger numbers of young people may begin to see Yarram as a place where exciting employment, education and training prospects are available and accessible and where there is a wide range of recreational and social opportunities. Health services are easier to access and there is an opportunity to travel to other parts of Gippsland and the metropolitan area with greater ease. If we can play a part in making this a reality through the active engagement of young people and working in partnership with the local community then I believe that we can also play a part in enticing them back or retaining young people in Yarram.

The CHAIR — Thank you Melanie.

Ms COOLIDGE — I actually do not have anything to say.

The CHAIR — Just a question, you are a youth worker here Melanie, and Jane your organization has obviously made decision to employ a youth worker, why have you chosen to do that over the myriad of other things, obviously health services has got to prioritise, and I suppose what were the motivations to do that and what do you think of the outcomes that are coming out of that, that may be would not have been achieved otherwise?

Ms COOLIDGE — For small towns we have to be fairly dynamic in how we deliver service and we have to be pretty flexible about how we deliver service. So the health service could have looked at, yes core business is just doing the physical bits and pieces that we need to do for our community, but it is actually broader than that. Physical health is reliant on mental and social health, if we do not have a mentally and healthy community you are

going to find that you have more physical health problems within the community. So the health service basically made a commitment to not only have a youth worker but also to apply for other funding to support other community type programs. So I guess that is why the health service has seen that. It is not realistic or feasible for a federal or state government program to come in and fund a youth program for a small town with a population of 2,000 we would love to have a JPET program or something like that here, but it is not feasible it is not going to happen.

We are an hour from any of the major towns and it is very difficult. A lot of funded programs if you have youth workers may be funded full time. To travel out of their way, two hours both ways, it is a big chunk of their time to spend in a small area. The other component to it too is that we need to work closely with those larger towns in our area because they do have resources that we can access, but they perhaps just need to give us a little bit more to be able to access those communities. That is one of the outcomes. What have we learnt from it? Lots and we are still learning. The position only started in August last year and I think it has given us greater access to young people and what their issues are, any conversations they want to have. It certainly is being used by the school and a lot of the other teams up here at the health service.

Mr INGRAM — One of the comments from the Yarram Standard in relation to the forum was that employers raised concerns about young people's readiness for and attitudes towards work. That is something that has come up in the past here, I am wondering whether that is a perception thing, or a reality and how you deal with that in the education system or you know, we are doing a fair amount right through all levels of government trying to get young people through the education system in a work free environment and there is a whole range of programs that do not seem to be meeting the needs if that is the case.

Ms MITCHELL — I think that was one of the big things that came out of the work that we have been doing and whether it was actually reality I guess we have a little bit more work to do around finding out exactly how much that is true. I think it comes back to the community working together a bit more and for example, putting a mentoring program that can match local employers with young people just to try and increase their employment opportunities and increasing their skills and at the moment that is not happening in Yarram.

Ms COOLIDGE — There is a lot of external things around those relationships between young people and employers. Is the young person in a job because it is a value to them and they are at a point in their life that they want to do that or is the young person in a job because this is what they have to do at the moment. Like any of us, if we are in something that we do not perceive as being value, well we are not going to put in 100% are we? A lot of it too, is part of what I think the football people said about honour, it was Damian Yodgee, who said there is a bit of history, everyone knows everyone, if you have done something wrong when you are young, it tends to stick with you, it is a bit of a legend or whatever it is.

Sometimes, when you go for jobs the employer might have a preconceived idea about how you are going to operate which might in turn affect actually how that person would act, which may not be a true representation of themselves. I think there are a lot of things and I think that is why we need to have really good communication. It might be a small community, but I would be really surprised actually -- how not often there is a lot of communication that goes between sections of a small community. It happens in large ones, but it certainly happens in smaller ones too. I think sometimes we forget that. It is a small community everyone knows everyone, they all know what is going on, when in reality that do not necessarily know the whole story, because you are getting half the story from the fifth person down the line who has heard this from someone that is up the line. That is probably why we are embarking on this whole, we need to speak directly to each sector to hear what they have to say to us and then we need to take this to the young people and say this is what these guys are saying about you people, how will you respond to that and then how do you change that, and how can we work together to change that. So there are heaps of things around us, not just one.

Mr INGRAM — Just to listen to that comment though, we have had youth workers here from Wellington Shire Council which covers your area, there are youth workers in local employment organizations, there seems to be this duplication right across which I sort of question. I want you to justify why it is so needed that your organization is doing this thing, when I would say that some of it really is the role of other organizations. Is it because those other organizations are not doing their job?

Ms COOLIDGE — I do not think it is because they are not doing their job I think it is limitations around how they can do their job. Melanie's not a full time person, she is 20 hours a week but that 20 hours is absolutely

stretched to the maximum. So I guess for me if that 20 hours is stretched to the maximum doing a welfare component and providing a community welfare component I cannot imagine David Roberts looking at his whole Wellington council coming down and spending 20 hours in Yarram and then saying to the rest of Wellington you can have another 20 hours and that is it. I think sure if Melanie was sitting twiddling her thumbs and not doing anything I would be like, yes, it is not a valued resource.

In terms of duplication, I think if you look at all the programs that state and federal government fund there is a hell of a lot of duplication that goes around, but it gets used. It is not that it does not get used, because there is a need out there. I think though every area is different, every little section is different every little section is different you would have to be extremely skilled to have intimate knowledge of each of your local government areas, it is more than a one person job.

Mr INGRAM — It is all right, I am just asking the question

Mr McQUILTEN — But a very good answer well done.

Mr INGRAM — Following on from what you are just saying, clearly it was identified there is a need in this community for all that, for something to be done, it is high priority. We are making recommendations to state government, hopefully recommendations to stage government, state parliament to try and resolve some of the issues, so out of the outcomes of the forum what is the state government's role and what can we do to address some of those concerns? Can you pick out one or two things that came out of that forum, that you think is the state government's job, what can we do to assist you in delivering the outcomes that you identify?

Ms MITCHELL — I think a lot of that comes from the LLEN and we have worked very closely with Gippsland East LLEN to get this forum happening and some very good work has come out of that and if we did not have their support, then I do not think this would have happened. We find them very approachable and their work down there and this comes through their funding that they are able to give to some of the programs that we have been able to start up.

Ms COOLIDGE — There are some basic cultural shifts too. It is great to look on the television and see how wonderful Melbourne is and we do have those advertisements that say look at Gippsland it is beautiful we have got great natural resources here for tourism but it is not really look at Gippsland we have got great natural resources here to come and live. Both Melanie and I were born and raised here in rural towns, Melanie in Yarram, I was in Leongatha. We both went away did our bits and pieces and now we have come back and I have come back this is where I want to raise my family and I have managed to get a job here, which is a bonus. Melanie has come back here because this is where her anchor is and I guess it is that seed planting. We cannot keep them here but we need to be able to plant that seed. So we need to be able to promote, yes go away and have a great time, but do not forget in five or six years, this may be a really great place for you that you want to come back to and live and raise your kids and do all those kind of things, or go away to university, but do not forget when you are out there looking for jobs, keep rural Victoria in mind because that is there. When I went to university there was nothing like looking for jobs outside of Melbourne. It is a very Melbourne metro centred and you are surrounded by all this stuff that is all that is going on in your head and you get caught up in that.

Mr INGRAM — I do not know whether you can answer my question, as a member of parliament we go to a whole range of these forums like you ran, and we come out with a whole range of outcomes and yet I go to another one 12 months later or 2 years later which we have the same discussion, the same issues keep coming up. I would like to think that what we have here, we can actually put some things forward, that we might not solve all the problems but if we can solve one or two, that is what I was just saying. If there is anything that came out of that you can say okay as a group of MPs we can make recommendations to parliament to try and solve some of the challenges that are local, even if on the edge, it is on the margins, to either maintain young people to improve the job opportunities, to give people the confidence to employ young people. I would like to say if there is anything that came out of it that is what I would like to see.

Ms COOLIDGE — Can we say watch this space, because we still have two more forums to run and lots of conversations to have. So ideally at the end of this what we are hoping is to have concrete projects that community members have committed to, to say we are happy to back this up. Obviously we are going to drive it, there always needs to be driver, I do not care what anyone tells me about not being drivers, there has to be drivers and most of the time they have to be paid. It is difficult to commit in this day and age volunteers to many, many

hours of work to drive something. Look that is what we are hoping will come out of this is that we will have employers and trainers and educators and ourselves working together with young people developing all sorts of work programs that we feel will change the culture here.

The CHAIR — Okay, thank you very much Jane and Melanie, and to Yarram District Health Service thank you for allowing us the space today and for helping the committee with the organization it is very much appreciated. You will receive a copy of the transcript in the next two weeks, you may correct any typographical errors, but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.