

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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Mr J Lawrence Chief Executive Officer, Kilmany Uniting Care (sworn).

The CHAIR — Welcome John. 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 LAWRENCE — John Lawrence, Chief Executive of Kilmany Uniting Care.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much John, please give us your presentation for around about 10 minutes and then we will have some questions following that.

Mr LAWRENCE — I did not want to go through the submission.

The CHAIR — No you certainly do not have to as we have a copy of that.

Mr LAWRENCE — I guess the issues that come to me, I have been a rural health activist for possibly 15 years and considerable issues that you would all be aware of about workforce and getting doctors and nurses and so on. The issues from Kilmany's perspective in those sorts of areas, are very similar to young people. To a large degree I think it comes down to three points and that is employment, social issues and government. If I can comment on those.

I wanted to say that unfortunately that in rural areas we have come up with the language of disadvantaged. If we want something from the government, we have to tell people how bad it is. Rural life is good, it has wonderful things, wonderful aspects to it I am not going to move to the city, I have come from Melbourne this morning, I do not want to do that again. We need to create a culture where we celebrate rural life rather than talking it down. In my submission I emphasise why is the committee looking into the terms of reference? Why do we want young people in rural areas? I think that needs to be explained within the committee report.

I wanted to highlight two particular case studies that I think are particularly interesting. One Craig has been involved in and that is the Students At Work program in the high country. Probably five years ago there was some youth forums – it is probably earlier than that it started following the floods in East Gippsland. There were youth forums one of the things that came up there was no McDonald's in the high country and so it is hard for kids to get part-time employment. A partnership between the secondary schools at Swifts Creek, the health service at Omeo, Kilmany Uniting Care and Commonwealth government officer in Omeo started the Students at Work project. Kilmany found some money through the Uniting Church and subsidised the hourly wage with young people in business in Benambra, Omeo and Swifts Creek. It has been remarkably successful, over 100 young people have had employment. Initially there were the traditional barriers, employers did not want to employ young people, they got over that, and employers give their skills to employ people and there are training programs for that and that branched out into an entrepreneurial program where people started their own businesses. I mention in my submission that in fact it changed the culture in terms of growing and social activity in one particular area.

The second one I wanted to comment on is a project that is currently happening in East Gippsland called the Yungarlu project which is about aboriginal health. The strategy is to provide jobs for young indigenous people. That is being funded again through funds from the Uniting Church and from the East Gippsland Primary Care Partnership, it gets money from DHS. Currently I think it is 13 young people who are currently employed in different organizations. If you look at East Gippsland in terms of indigenous employment I can probably count on one hand the number of indigenous people who have jobs outside the aboriginal industry and this has tremendous promise. It is going beyond just a traditional employment program. It is getting involved in cultural awareness programs and getting involved in pre-employment training and education with young Kooris and there is a mentoring program which is about to start next month.

So they are the two particular case studies I wanted to mention. Do you want me to go through recommendations, you have them there?

The CHAIR — No not necessarily, the message that you have emphasised is the major one in your submission, so it is up to you.

Mr LAWRENCE — The one thing I want to emphasise if I can table this other document, which I only found on Monday. Craig Ingram will remember the Young Futures Summit in Bairnsdale, it was in May three years ago. A number of recommendations came from that and that is the photocopy of those recommendations. John Thwaites was at that summit, and it is my understanding that he promised that he would implement any of the recommendations that came out of the summit. There are good recommendations there basically relating to work experience and training and so on. I am not aware of any that have been implemented at all. So that is the cynicism I guess towards these sorts of activities.

The CHAIR — I understand that fully.

Mr INGRAM — John, the Students at Work, enormous support locally and we had a little bit of a discussion yesterday at the hearing about it. We have not really touched on the business side of it and why that is important. I also think we have not really discussed why Kilmany have to do that and how difficult it has been to get the ongoing funding for that program. Have you got enough information on the current standing of that about where it sits and why it does not get continuous funding?

Mr LAWRENCE — It is not just Students at Work Craig, it is any innovation, if it is successful does not tend to get continuing fund, it tends to stop. That is just a problem, someone comes up with new funding priorities and that is a pity. I think the Students at Work is very innovative. I think some people might say it is just putting the money in the pockets of business people, therefore why should we do it, why should we put money in – very small amounts of money Kilmany put in it is about \$50,000 over the period of time. I think I am not sure which partner it was, put in \$25,000 but it is not enormous amounts of money, but the outcome for the kids has just been amazing just in their outlook, in their ability to review their future careers, rather than having to leave the high country and never come back, a lot of them are saying they can come back. In terms of business I am not sure what you mean by that. Are you talking about the local business?

Mr INGRAM — No I am talking about a generic role.

Mr LAWRENCE — That was because some of the kids said they do not want to be employees, we want to be entrepreneurs and we provided three scholarships in the first year at \$1,000 each. Local people mentored the students in developing business plans and budgets. Again I think I talk about it in there, about some successes. I am not aware of any of the businesses that are still going, continued, but it has given them a flavour of I guess what small business is all about at a very cheap rate. In subsequent years we reduce that \$1,000 for the kids were not asking for that much money and I think the last year I was on the selection committee, they were \$500, \$250, they were given very small amounts of money but the major impact on kids lives and kids communities.

Mr INGRAM — But also you cover some fairly remote parts of the state. One of the issues that is put at me fairly regularly is that service providers in those remote areas, they are asked to provide services to those remote communities, but there is no acknowledgment of the higher cost of the delivery of services to those places like Omeo, Swifts Creek, so organizations which go into those areas and try to deliver new services, there is no component to cover those costs.

Mr LAWRENCE — The bureaucrats would say the rent in Melbourne balances the higher transport cost in rural areas. I really enjoy it when people ring up and say can we say you tomorrow at 9.30 they think we are that far on the map, they forget the mountain range or whatever. Or in even in some areas, the weather, the snow you cannot get in to some places. I think for years in some smaller communities it has been suggested we should have an amalgamation of different roles to make a generic full time role. So you tend to be allocated in a point two, point two, point two, drug and alcohol counsellor, youth worker whatever and there are some people who believe that is a good model, personally I do not. I think you should be looking at amalgamation of models. You have your critical mass, it is better for employment and it is better for expertise.

Mr INGRAM — Promotion of youth, what do you think one of the challenges we have is? You say recognising the great lifestyle, we do not recognise the great lifestyle and all the rest of it, but there are some challenges there. How have you begun to acknowledge that there are those higher costs yet but we also kind of maintain the, if you like, that positive outlook.

Mr LAWRENCE — One of my recommendations is about a round table and I think we need to get the decision makers to talk to young people, rather than me, rather than you talking to the Premier, I think if the Premier talks to young people that is where changes happen.

The CHAIR — John, your submission is fantastic, thank you for all the work you have done and your recommendations, they are innovative and creative which is fantastic. You will get a copy of the transcript in about two weeks time and you may correct any typographical errors but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew