

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Melbourne — 29 May 2006

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Witnesses

Mr C. DeAraugo, chief executive officer (sworn);

Mr J. Reade (sworn); and

Ms F. Carboon, director (sworn), Lead On Australia.

The CHAIR — Welcome, James, Chris and Felicia. 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 young people in rural towns and communities. Welcome. Before we begin, could you please provide us with your full name and address, the name of the organisation you represent and your position within that organisation, and then take an oath or affirmation.

Mr DeARAUGO — My name is Chris DeAraugo from Lead On Australia; that is my role. We are based in Bendigo. My business address is View Street, Bendigo.

Mr READE — My name is James Reade. I work for Lead On and am also a young person who lives and goes to school in Bendigo. The Lead On address is View Street, Bendigo.

Ms CARBOON — I am Felicia Carboon; I am a Lead On Australia director, which is at View Street, Bendigo.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for attending today. Could you please give us your evidence for perhaps 10 minutes or so, and then we might have some time for questions after that.

Mr DeARAUGO — Absolutely. Thanks for having us here. I also applaud the initiative of the whole inquiry, because obviously it is close to what Lead On believes is important to regional and rural communities. I will be very brief. The reason James and Felicia are here is to tell their stories of what the involvement in an activity like Lead On has meant to them and their views and connections and desires to stay and remain in regional communities. I thought it would be far more relevant to hear some of their stories.

From the submission that was presented to the inquiry, which I assume the committee members have read, the only key points I would make are these. What Lead On has demonstrated and learnt in its history is that there are so many young people in rural and regional communities who do not know what is possible for them in their local areas.

Too many youth programs segregate instead of integrate young people. A lot of programs are developed for kids and they will give them labels like at risk or at something else. There are just not enough ways to integrate them. The Lead On model is all about integrating, for a start, diverse ranges of young people from all sorts of backgrounds coming together to work on a real-life activity. The Lead On model is young people here, diverse people there, and the community on the other side. Lead On is the catalyst in the middle, or the facilitator of real-life activity.

We know there are ample opportunities in any community, irrespective of its size, to engage and involve young people in meaningful, relevant activity. There is also the great opportunity to then involve older people as mentors. One of the things we have also learnt is there are many contrived mentoring programs. They do not work. If you give older people and younger people the chance to come together around a real-life activity, then genuine relationships tend to develop as in normal parts of life. The submission we presented talks about that — the value of relevant mentoring, relevant projects, that there are no shortages of opportunities; there are just not enough vehicles, I suppose, to engage young people in these real-life activities. With that I would like to hand over to Felicia.

Felicia has been involved with Lead On, initially as a 16-year-old participant in the first wave when we were building the Lead On model. She has played a role, and now at the ripe old age of 22 she is a director of Lead On Australia. Her story will probably articulate better some of the outcomes of involving young people in real activity.

Ms CARBOON — I would also like to take the opportunity to thank you all for having us here. The fact that James and I are here today is a real testament to the Lead On model. It really shows what it is all about — getting young people involved and giving them experiences that they would not have otherwise. That is an important point to make.

By way of background, I started with Lead On in 1999, when it was just starting. The first project I got involved in was 'Loop'. I do not know whether any of you have heard of it, but it is a youth supplement that appears in regional and rural newspapers. It is compiled completely by young people who write the content, edit the content, take the photos, do the layout and have pretty much full editorial control over what goes into that publication. In Bendigo it is four pages a week, and it has now expanded into eight of our Lead On sites. We have big groups of young people, ranging from anywhere between 12 or 13 up to their mid to late 20s producing this publication on a weekly or monthly basis.

I was involved in that for 12 to 18 months. After I finished my VCE I went straight into a three-year cadetship with the Swan Hill *Guardian*, in Peter Walsh's area. I suppose I continued on the journalism path because of my involvement with 'Loop'. I have no doubt in saying that my job came from my experience with Lead On and 'Loop'. You do not get a 17-year-old girl walking up the street and jumping straight into a job as a journalist, but having that experience behind me set me in good stead.

I continued my involvement with Lead On in Swan Hill on the steering committee there. We were just setting up a site in Swan Hill at that time. Even though I had moved away from my own town, I took with me that sense of community and an eagerness to get involved. Then I went back to Bendigo where, as Chris mentioned, I started as a Lead On director. That has been a fantastic experience, sitting on a board with the likes of Chris as the CEO and Rob Hunt, who is our chairman. That has been fantastic.

There are four or five key points that make Lead On so important. One of them is giving young people those skills, so they are getting involved in those real life projects and getting those on-the-ground skills-- it is not the theory, it is the on-the-ground real stuff. They are getting involved in that and learning those skills at an early age. It creates networks. You are meeting the likes of Rob Hunt, the editor of the newspaper or the person who runs the cinema when you are 16. When you walk down the street you can say g'day to those people. That is a pretty good feeling. It also stands them in good stead to have those networks later in life.

The sense of achievement and purpose that comes from working on a Lead On project is really important. That, in turn, builds confidence in young people, which, as we know, is really important. There are plenty of other spin-off opportunities. James and I are here today; we would not have got to do that without being involved with Lead On. Sitting in front of you is an experience that we have never had before and something that not a lot of young people would have.

I will just briefly touch on this one. I have just returned from a week-long trip with the Governor-General, Michael Jeffrey, across the outback. You might have heard about it; it has been in the media. Myself and a young man from Beaudesert in Queensland went on the entire tour with the Governor-General. It was amazing. How many young people get to sit in a car with the Governor-General for 6 hours and have his undivided attention! It was not a project of Lead On, but it was a direct result of my involvement with Lead On. There are plenty of opportunities.

But I suppose from this committee's point of view the most important thing — it is not a direct aim of Lead On, but it helps retain young people in rural communities — is that our overarching aim is building community capacity. In doing that our main audience is young people. We try to give them that sense of belonging. Getting them on the ground, doing that real work, meeting the people who make things happen and seeing how things do happen really builds up a sense of belonging. It builds up a belief that 'Hey, maybe this community has got something to offer. They do want to listen to what I am saying. Even if I do go away and come back, I am still wanted. I can still make a life for myself here in this community'. That is certainly what I did. I went away to Swan Hill. Even though I did leave home, I went to another rural town. I could see the opportunities there. I took them up, I went for it, and I came back to Bendigo. I have got no intention of leaving any time soon. I do not want to come and live in Melbourne. I love coming to Melbourne, but certainly I do not live here. I really love living in a rural community where you have got that sense of community.

Chris mentioned before the real life side of it. There are plenty of programs that do work to some degree — you sit down and have a coffee with a mentor, or you go and observe what is happening on a board — but getting involved in that real-life situation really gives you real insight and creates a real sense of belonging, and I think that is what is important and one of the great things about Lead On.

Mr DeARAUGO — I will introduce James Reade. He is 16. James has been involved with Lead On for two years. I will let James tell his story, but one of the things he is part of that is exciting is a thing called

Community Door. In Bendigo through Lead On we now have 38 young people sitting on local boards and committees. That is an extraordinary outcome. We only wanted 20. It is a bit of an ongoing wave effect there. It is a situation where more and more young people want to participate, but more importantly, more and more boards and committees in the community keep knocking on our door saying, 'We had better get a young person'. There is a sense of being left out if they have not got a young person. That is a fantastic dynamic that is happening in the community. I will hand over to James Reade.

Mr READE — As Chris mentioned, my Lead On involvement started out two years ago. I was probably just an average high school student who did not really like school. I was looking at dropping out and doing an apprenticeship or something like that. School has not really pushed my buttons over the years. Mum was reading the paper one day and she saw a public notice about a youth forum as part of Youth Week and the Commonwealth Youth Games. She said, 'Come on, James, it would be a great chance to get involved in your community'. I said, 'No, Mum. Who wants to get involved in their community? It is so uncool'. She went on, 'Come on, James, you should do it'. I said, 'No, Mum; community — losers!'. It went on, and at the end of it she said, 'James, there is free pizza, does that help?', so I said, 'Okay'.

So I ended up going along to this meeting to check it out and see what it was about with a few of my mates. It was really weird — there was a community group actually asking what we, young people, wanted to do. So I went along to organise this band gig as part of the Commonwealth Youth Games, and Lead On was the facilitator of that. So we got the chance to organise a fun day out. We got people off the streets to come and listen to good music and help out a couple of Australian bands as well. It got us involved in the event management scene, working with different businesses and that kind of thing.

From there I realised this is something I really enjoyed, so I went on. Chris got me involved in a project called Community Door. I was lucky enough to be placed on the B-Central board. Normally when I do this speech I actually ask people if they know what B-Central is. Most people in Bendigo hopefully know what it is, because I am meant to be in charge of marketing for it. B-Central is a \$3 million youth resource centre in Bendigo that they built for young people to come and get information — and to be involved in their community, virtually.

From that, here I am. I remember my first meeting up at council chambers, sitting around with, like, ex-mayors and that kind of thing — CEOs of different local organisations and that kind of thing — and here was young Lord Jimmy sitting up there, mingling with these big, high-profile people in Bendigo. I remember my first meeting. I went along. I did not say much; I was just more blown away about who I was sitting around the table with. Towards the end of the meeting, they actually lean across and go, 'James, what do you think about this issue?'. I am, like, 'Wow, here are these high-profile community people actually asking what Lord Jimmy thinks about an issue in this community'. That really blew me away. But then I actually told them my opinion on this issue and they actually acted on that as well. So I am, 'Wow, I can have an effect on my community' — young people are still part of their community.

So from Lead On, at the moment I am doing my B-Central board experience from that. I have gained this connection with my community. Here I am, working with different organisations, gaining this connection with my community — which therefore will help me out in the future. Felicia touched on it before; networking and creating connections is a big thing you need in life. They say 70 per cent of jobs are not advertised; most of them are given to people who know other people. So for me in the future, hopefully with this networking in this way and my connection with my community, I will be more than likely to get a job in that kind of area.

Schoolwise — as I mentioned, I did not really enjoy school. I still go to school at the moment. I do a school-based traineeship in business. So I work part-time for Lead On — that is something I really enjoy doing, getting involved in my community — and I also get the chance to go to school part time as well. The school was really good for that; they created things for me in different areas. It is a really good way to get involved in something I enjoy and actually still complete my schooling, because I realise if I want to follow this path I actually do need schooling, but in different ways.

Another thing you get out of Lead On is obviously confidence. You are actually out there networking, creating opportunities for yourself. Here I am, sitting around a board table discussing issues regarding a \$3 million B-Central building and here I am in Parliament House today, talking about different things like that. Without Lead On I would not have the ability to do that and I definitely would not have had the confidence to do that.

I have exceeded things like the Lead On community dinner. We had 400 people in attendance that night and for a young person, being 15 and stepping up in front of that and exceeding the night, that really changed my life. It has created so much and given me so much. Lead On is probably one of the best things; I would not be where I am today, I would not be doing the things I am today and more than likely I would have tried to get out of Bendigo as quickly as I could. Now I actually realise there is something good in Bendigo, there is something good in my community, I am part of our community and I am our community. Also other young people that I am working with have started to realise this as well and are seeing that their community can give something back to them if they put something in — they have to gain a great connection there.

Mr DeARAUGO — Thanks, James. And when we first met him he was an absolute wilting violet; you could not get two words out of him.

Mr INGRAM — Are you sure?

Mr DeARAUGO — That is true. It is beautiful and, as he said, the confidence, the networks and that type of stuff that so many young people get. There is another problem that I spoke to Lillian about, bringing young people. There is no shortage of young people who would have loved to have been here today to talk about not so much Lead On — I mean, it is lovely that they are talking about Lead On — but what getting involved in their community has meant to them and how it has grown their skills. Questions, I suppose, if you have any.

Mr INGRAM — Just on the community boards, what sort of spread of organisations have you got people on?

Mr DeARAUGO — It is a big spread, Craig, because diversity is important.

Mr INGRAM — You did not actually mention it, so if you would just give us some examples.

Mr DeARAUGO — In the Bendigo one there are a couple of businessy-type things. The local credit union's advisory grant and the community health centre — very businessy, which appeals to kids who want to go down that path. Then there are environmental boards, sporting groups; It has got to be diverse, because if we are genuine about getting a diverse range of kids, and at different levels — and the age range is quite diverse in the Community Door program — they have got to be diverse boards. You have got everything from the local YMCA to an organisation that looks after homeless people down to sports and environment; it is quite diverse.

Mr INGRAM — So without your involvement, those opportunities would not have been there, although some of them obviously would have tried to? Is your involvement actually matching young people with the different areas?

Mr DeARAUGO — Yes. The matching process is a critical part of this, because you have got the young person here and the board or community there. It needs someone in the middle to facilitate and coordinate, and that is our role.

Ms CARBOON — Just another point there: a lot of organisations like that have a youth board, whereas we are mixing up the young people with the actual directors, so that is where the difference lies, I think.

Mr INGRAM — Currently what is your reach? Where do you cover? You are saying that you — —

Mr DeARAUGO — In Victoria?

Mr INGRAM — Yes.

Mr DeARAUGO — There are now 15 Lead Ons nationally, but in Victoria we have Mildura, Swan Hill, Echuca–Moama — that is a joint one — Bendigo, Ballarat and Maryborough. We are running an outreach pilot in the Moonee Valley region down here, and currently there are four or five other communities throughout Victoria alone trying to get Lead On established. Our model is different. We do not rely on government funding for ongoing livelihood, because that does not create anything at the end of the day, only another handout mentality. Government can play a good role regarding catalyst funding, but our model does not seek to rely on government funding. Bendigo, for example, generates over \$200 000 worth of income into Lead On Bendigo — not one dollar of state or federal government funding. We think that is great, with due respect. We will take the government money if it is appropriate — too much of it tries to force you down a separate track — and then you use your community drive.

Mr INGRAM — So basically if you want to set up in a particular area you need to try and get the right, if you like, community leaders in that area to take — —

Mr DeARAUGO — That is the model. Each Lead On in each of those communities has a Lead On advisory group made up of people like us from the community who care enough about the value of young people and also the long-term future of their community. That is their common denominator. You will have a youth advisory board. The young people are important because they determine what activity you undertake — it has got to be relevant to them — and that is the model. The role of the adults is primarily to try to develop funding strategies, income strategies, and that is the way that model works.

Mr McQUILTEN — Tell us about Brett Parry in Maryborough.

Mr DeARAUGO — Brett Parry, yes; I was talking to him this morning. Brett is our manager in Maryborough. He is fantastic. He has a background in the YMCA of course, but he also has a business brain. One of the things we — —

Mr McQUILTEN — And in the police force he was a youth — —

Mr DeARAUGO — Yes. Brett is finding the role particularly good because it couples his own agenda as far as developing young people with growing the community of Maryborough. We are looking at an activity over there at the minute where it looks like we are going to buy a little coffee shop, but the stakeholders will be four or five businesspeople from Maryborough who will put the money in. The young people will drive it, work there and, instead of getting structured training, we are going to get mentors. I spoke before about genuine mentoring. We are going to get people from the community who will actually work with the business plan and develop the strategies. Again, it will be a community activity, running a community business. That is Brett Parry's role. He is a good get for us.

Dr NAPTHINE — Chris, you said earlier — and I wrote it down because I thought it was very apt and accurate — that too many programs, youth programs particularly, segregate and do not integrate.

Mr DeARAUGO — Yes.

Dr NAPTHINE — I absolutely agree with that. We focus too much on youth at risk. Can you tell me how many young people in Bendigo of the population pool of, say, 15 to 22-year-olds does Lead On touch, and do you feel that the more successful you are you then attract perhaps the other end of the youth market rather than the youth at-risk market?

Mr DeARAUGO — Our strategy is to start in the middle. We have got some rocket scientists involved with Lead On; there are some really smart kids. We have got kids who live in homeless accommodation, do not have any sort of parental support and struggle to read and write. What happens is, because we start in the middle and build out, those kids can join in Lead On activities, and for the first time in their lives they tell us they feel normal. They do not feel like they have got this stamp on their heads that says, 'I'm at risk or need special care'. When these young people are sitting around a table with people they never thought they would be sitting with, they start to feel a sense of normality, and they are integrated into the community. One of the flaws, I believe, in the at-risk mentality is you get a bunch of kids who have had a hard time, and what we do is put them with another bunch of kids who have had a hard time, and they work in isolation in a corner somewhere.

Most kids know that; they are not being a fool. Our model is trying to integrate, to make sure we get young people from all the diverse backgrounds of that community. We never talk about kids' backgrounds either. Some of those kids have fascinating backgrounds; that is the only way I can put it nicely. Some of them have a tremendous mum and dad and know they will get their evening meal every night. The ability to integrate is pretty critical to our model. Does that answer your question, Denis? I do not think it did in a way.

Dr NAPTHINE — Come back to the first part of it. If there is in Bendigo a population of, say, 80 000 in the district and 5000 to 8000 young people, what numbers do you touch out of that pool?

Mr DeARAUGO — In Bendigo the sad thing is we have only had probably 1000 young people actively involved in Lead On activity. Lots of others have been to events and been touched by it. The number of kids who have been able to get involved and really grow is just over 1000, which is a poor result. Our resources are limited.

We have always been in this good and bad position. We are never able to keep up with demand from young people or the community. That is a good thing, but it means you are always running with a brake on. It is only 1000, which is a poor result. But that is all resource based because if we are going to earn our money as opposed to the mentality of taking a handout, it restricts us. Bendigo Lead On is now in the best shape it has ever been. We have the equivalent of three full-time people now, but it is all self-funded. That took five years of hard work to get there. We could do a lot more.

Mr McQUILTEN — The Maryborough one was planned or talked about probably three years ago.

Mr DeARAUGO — Yes, and to be frank it is only since the arrival of Brett, who is a very proactive manager, that it is really starting to work. We have had great community support. The resource issue is critical. One of the things we try to do is we talk about something called collaborative commerce. The community sector never has enough money. I come from a corporate background where, to put it simply, you either earned your money or you did not. In the community sector we try to build partnerships across a whole lot of organisations in each region where we are. That is why we can tap into kids who have had a lesser time, and work with homeless organisations or other organisations which have been funded to work with young people. We try to build collaborative relationships to bring those kids in as well.

The CHAIR — Lead On started in Bendigo and has spread to other towns since then. What was the process to move into those other places? How did that actually occur?

Mr DeARAUGO — They came to us. The only one we mucked up was we went to Mildura because someone said we should. We rode in on a big white horse and said, 'Here we are'. That was silly. Every other community that has opened or is opening a Lead On has found us. We do not have the resources to grow out proactively to try to open one. It is a nice problem to have, I suppose, but it is frustrating to have all these communities lining up trying to raise their own money right now to start their Lead On.

Our relationship with Bendigo Bank and the community banks has been critical in that. That is a fantastic success story. These people grow wings after they have built a bank. Now they are asking what is the most important thing. It is the retention rate in their community through young people. They have identified Lead On as one of the strategies which will help retain young people and grow their community in the future. A lot of the interest comes out of the Bendigo Bank connection.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about two weeks time. You may correct any errors but not matters of substance. Thank you very much for coming in.

Mr DeARAUGO — Thanks for having us.

Witnesses withdrew.