

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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Witness

Ms G. Ferrari, executive officer, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (affirmed).

The CHAIR — I will not read through the committee's opening statement because I know you were here beforehand.

Ms FERRARI — Sure.

The CHAIR — Could you please provide us with your full name and address and the name of the organisation you represent and your position within that organisation, and then take your affirmation.

Ms FERRARI — Certainly. My name is Georgie Marie Ferrari; I am from the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria. My position there is executive officer, and the business address is level 2, 172 Flinders Street, Melbourne.

The CHAIR — Could you give us your evidence for about 10 minutes, following which we will have some time for questions.

Ms FERRARI — The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria is the peak body for young people and youth issues in the state. It is a not-for-profit, non-government organisation that is funded through the state government, through the Office for Youth. We are an independent body; we have about 350 members across the state and about one-third of our members are young people aged between 12 and 25. Our membership is representative of about 80 per cent of Victoria's postcodes, so we have not a bad spread.

We thank the committee for the opportunity to present today and congratulate it on focusing its attention and work on this area. It is an area that YACVic has been long concerned with, and we welcome the opportunity to present to you. Today we will draw from three main pieces of work that we have done over a number of years. These are YACVic's 2001 study in collaboration with the Centre for Adolescent Health entitled *The Rural Life of Us*; proceedings from our *Reversing the Drift* conference in 2002 that was held in Shepparton; and more recently, findings from a survey of local youth service providers on gaps in youth service provision in Victoria.

I had asked Dani Klein, a member of our youth reference group, to be with us today. She lives in Bendigo. I wanted her to co-present with me, and she was very looking forward to doing so. But she is unwell and stuck in Warrnambool, so she is not going to be with us.

I would like to start by stating the obvious. Dr Napthine, I think you picked up on my point well by saying that it is okay that some young people might not want to go to rural and regional towns. YACVic would certainly see that it is important that young people have the choice and the freedom to choose where they live. Just because you are born in a rural or regional town does not mean you have to stay there, just as if you are not born in a regional or rural town it does not mean you cannot go there. It is a bit of a no-brainer, but YACVic would really like to make the point that young people should have choice and freedom about where they live. Beyond this, though, YACVic wants to present around three major themes that have come up through the work it has done in consulting with young people and service providers on this issue. The first is access to services, including education, employment and training, and transport issues. The second is meaningful participation, and the third is valuing diversity.

In terms of access to services, we know from talking to young people that they often feel forced out of their communities due to a lack of access to services, to education and to employment opportunities. We cannot talk about lack of access to services without talking about the T-word — transport. It comes up every time we talk to young people. I know as you have been travelling around and about you will have heard that over and over again. We know that a lack of transport options can impact on every aspect of a young person's life. In recent research YACVic has conducted into youth service gaps in Victoria stories from rural and regional Victoria have given us some cause for alarm. The anecdote I am about to give you comes from the Wangaratta region, and it highlights safety issues for young people through a lack of transport. This is a direct quote:

A 14-year-old drove himself to an appointment (in another town 45 kilometres away) the other day because he didn't want to get into trouble missing it and his family let him down.

That is a big safety concern right there: a 14-year-old driving 45 kilometres to get to an appointment!

YACVic thinks community transport options need to be extended to include young people. Services need to be run at times that suit young people's needs to travel, and that means after school and into the evenings and weekends. We think more needs to be done to free up the school bus network so that these valuable assets can be accessed and used when not required to transport schoolchildren.

From our research it is clear that young people often leave rural and regional towns because of their inability to access services. This quote from the Southwest School Focused Youth Service that covers Portland, Hamilton and the Warrnambool area is typical of what we hear from Centrelink. This is another direct quote.

There is a high level of drug and alcohol abuse. Young people feel disconnected from society and not at all supported. As a result they form their own subcultures, which further disconnects them from their community. There is an increasing incidence of anxiety and depression amongst young people and youth suicide rates are high. Many young people leave rural areas due to the lack of opportunities and services.

Addressing service gaps in rural and regional areas is a vital step to ensuring young people feel supported and stay in their local areas. However, YACVic recognises that this is a difficult issue and not one that is easily solved.

The economic arguments for establishing a service in a small town may not be there. However, YACVic would recommend that the government investigate the co-location of multiple services under one roof. This model already exists in some parts of Victoria and has been very successful in regional centres in New South Wales. The model allows for more anonymity when young people enter the service. They could be presenting to see the doctor or to take part in an arts program or a theatre group. They might be there to see a Centrelink worker, to participate in a same-sex-attracted support group or to see a drug and alcohol counsellor. Co-located services do not have to provide a five-day-a-week service. They often establish a weekly or fortnightly routine of being present on a certain day. Young people quickly learn what day to go on to get the services they need.

The cost to services that normally operate in a bigger centre and expect people to come to them are kept down in the smaller model because the infrastructure costs are shared between many services. This is only one model that could be used to address service gaps in regional areas, but as it has proved successful elsewhere we think it deserves further attention in Victoria.

Other issues around access and services that are worth mentioning are around accommodation issues. Most areas of regional Victoria are reporting a lack of emergency accommodation for young people. There is also a shortage of medium and long-term accommodation options for young people. Recently at a Benalla forum we held in association with VCOSS workers in Wodonga said that recent increases there have virtually forced young people out of the private rental market altogether, and they are reporting that it is often a lack of accommodation options that drives young people into the city. That is for private rental market options, but also they talked about having to get a young person from Shepparton all the way down to Melbourne to find emergency accommodation because there were no beds available for them. So a young person who is already experiencing some crisis then has to travel out of the area to get a bed for the night.

Recreation is another common concern. I am sure you have heard this a lot in your travels around. Dani was going to speak about this in particular, but she wanted me to let you know that young people report that, unless you play sport, there is very little to do in your local area. In our report of 2001, *Rural Life of Us*, we noted that the heavy drinking that is often associated with sporting clubs and activities in rural areas does not necessarily provide very good role modelling for young people, so it is not always the most appropriate activity for them to be engaged in. Beyond this, if sport is not your thing, young people tell us that there is very little for them to do. This brings me nicely on to the meaningful participation aspect of my presentation.

In our report *Rural Life of Us* we noted that both the Wimmera and Central Highlands regional youth committees, which are now the regional youth affairs networks, reported that young people believe their voices are not being heard in terms of their needs in their community. This is a common complaint that we hear from young people: 'Nobody listens to us. Nobody cares about what we want'. One of the key points that Danni was going to raise was that her own experience of getting involved in her local community in Bendigo has made all the difference in terms of her feeling like she is contributing, making a difference and feeling connected. These feelings obviously make a huge difference in terms of wanting to stay in your local area. If you feel like you are valued and you have an opportunity to make a difference, it follows that you will want to stay or return once you finish your studies or travel.

YACVic believes that initiatives that support young people to have a voice in their community, make their own decisions and develop and deliver activities and events that they want to have in their local areas is a strong contributing factor in keeping young people in their communities or ensuring that they return. Investment, we think, should be made to give young people freedom and autonomy to make decisions about things that affect them in

their local communities. Local communities need to be trained in youth participation strategies to ensure that young people are meaningfully engaged in their communities, not in token ways but in ways that really matter to them.

Finally I just want to talk briefly about value and diversity. Many young people we have talked to cite discrimination, either in overt or subtle forms, as a reason for them to leave and not return to rural and regional areas. Many areas of Victoria struggle to accept diversity in the same way that a larger city might often tolerate or even celebrate it. Same-sex-attracted young people often talk of their struggles to 'come out' or even accept in themselves their sexuality in conservative small towns. Culturally and linguistically diverse young people talk of the difficulty they have in being accepted into small social groups. Young indigenous people often speak of the high levels of racism and abuse they are subjected to in rural and regional areas of Victoria. Young people who dye their hair, who wear the wonderful colours, who like to dress differently and who are into piercing and tattoos even talk of the difficulty they experience in standing out in rural and regional areas.

There is no easy solution to address the issue of the difficulty of being different in a small town. I think sharing meaningful participation is one way this issue can be addressed. Involving young people in mechanisms of engagement in participation would ensure young people mix and get to know each other, and more broadly community education campaigns and positive role modelling from respected community members may also address some of the problems.

It is important to note here that young indigenous people living in discrete Aboriginal communities — for example, around Swan Hill, Framlingham and other areas — may have quite unique experiences and things to say about staying in their local communities and how they can be better supported to stay or return to land that may have strong cultural significance to them. YACVic is aware that many specific and serious concerns around young people in remote indigenous communities accessing services exist, and we would strongly encourage the committee to consider the needs of rural and regional indigenous young people as part of this inquiry.

In concluding I would like to thank the committee for its important work in this area. YACVic is very interested in learning of your findings. I thank you for the opportunity.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Georgie. You talked briefly about meaningful participation in the community. Can you give us some examples of the ways you see that meaningful participation can take place?

Ms FERRARI — Sure. Participation exists along a whole spectrum. It can be as simple as consulting with young people about their ideas right through to young people being supported to come up with an idea, to finding the money for that idea or project to support it and to their putting it on themselves. So there is a whole range from just going to them for their ideas to putting them on a committee or a board to their taking full control of the situation.

All those things can be called youth participation and all of them are valuable; one is not necessarily better or worse than another. Where young people have talked to us about, say, really feeling like they are making a difference in their community is at that end, where they actually come up with an idea, are supported to find money for it and then put it on themselves — with the support of people behind them, but they feel like it has been their thing all the way through. That is not easily done; it is not something as simple as just clicking your fingers and it all happens. People need to be trained and worked with in order to achieve those outcomes.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Georgie, in YACVic's committee or directorate, what percentage of people are from regional or rural areas?

Ms FERRARI — We have a committee of 10. Five are young people between the ages of 16 and 25, and we have one designated position for rural and regional. That is a voted-on position — you have to be from outside metropolitan areas to be on that — so we have one person in a designated role in that. We do not have 10 on our committee at the moment, we have eight. So two out of eight. That is our board of directors or committee of management — whatever you want to call it — but on our youth reference group I think we have three young people out of 15, and on our policy advisory group, which is a group of workers, there are probably about three or four that are outside of Melbourne sitting on that.

The CHAIR — You talked about valuing diversity in rural communities and we have heard that in our rural hearings to date as well. Do you have any recommendations in regard to how we can go about promoting the

valuing of diversity and making communities aware of its importance, perhaps in the end for their own survival, as far as making sure that young people do remain?

Ms FERRARI — It is a good question. I did acknowledge in my presentation that it is not quickly or easily done. Community education campaigns I thought was one way potentially of doing it. I am sure a lot of rural and regional communities participate in things like harmony days and those sorts of things. I am sure that a lot of activity already takes place. In terms of same-sex-attracted young people, support groups that can help them come out and deal with their sexuality issues have been really successful. I guess I think the two are quite linked — the meaningful participation and the valuing diversity — because if you get people participating on an event, it does not matter where you are from or what your issues are. I think the point was made by the Lead On group, who said that as well. It is about everybody coming together for a common purpose, putting on an event or doing something together, and your social groups form around that.

Mr INGRAM — Georgie, that is an issue, whether people who are different or have different views are accepted in country areas. One of the things is that it is probably more of a problem because they are more identifiable because more people in a regional area know each other. That stigma, or prejudice if you like, probably exists in the broader community; it is just that it is not necessarily as identifiable. They can actually hide in a metropolitan area.

Ms FERRARI — Absolutely — and they will find more like-minded people in a metropolitan area.

Mr INGRAM — I will throw you another one: part of the reason why some young people want to look different is to shock.

Ms FERRARI — Absolutely. But in our work on the *Rural Life of Us* and around our Reversing the Drift conference several young people said that they do find it too difficult to look that different in their small communities. They identified that, so I am just reporting back to you on that. I guess there is a line: 'We want to stand out, but we don't want to be victimised for standing out'.

Mr INGRAM — Do people get victimised in metropolitan areas for the same thing?

Ms FERRARI — Potentially, but I think it is a lot easier to find a similar community — like-minded people and a community that you blend into where nobody will bat an eyelid if you have got green hair or six tats or whatever — in a bigger city. It is just safety in numbers.

Mr INGRAM — One of the issues coming forward as challenges to young people is the additional costs for young people coming to metropolitan areas to study. Is that something that has come through in your work?

Ms FERRARI — Yes. Young people have talked to us about that, and more broadly even just the fear of the unknown when coming to a big city to study. They have said things like: 'If we could have a guided tour of the city before we came or there was some way to bring us into the city in a more gentle way than just being dumped in it and having to find our own way around'. They have been talking about those things a lot, yes.

The CHAIR — Georgie, thank you very much for your evidence today and your efforts with your submission.

Ms FERRARI — Thank you.

The CHAIR — You will receive a copy of the transcript in about two weeks time, and you may correct any errors but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew.