

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Melbourne — 29 May 2005

Members

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Witness

Ms L. Healy, director, Office for Youth, Department for Victorian Communities (affirmed).

The CHAIR — Welcome, Lill. 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 in the inquiry into retaining young people in rural communities and towns. If you could please give us your full name and address, the name of the organisation you work for and your position within the organisation.

Ms HEALY — Lill Healy is my name. I am the director of the Office for Youth in the Department for Victorian Communities, the Victorian government. My work address is 1 Spring Street, Melbourne.

The CHAIR — If you would not mind providing us with your evidence for about 10 minutes or so, then we might have some time for questions following that.

Ms HEALY — Thank you.

Overheads shown.

Ms HEALY — Let me begin by placing the Youth Affairs portfolio in the context of the Department for Victorian Communities. This is important because the department works together with people and institutions to strengthen communities, and young people are part of communities. That is our starting position; that is the policy position of the government in respect of the framework for programs and policies. The role of the Office for Youth within that is to take a leadership look across government to coordinate and unite people in line with the government's policy broadly in youth affairs.

I would like to provide you with some examples of programs that contribute to community strengthening in rural towns and communities. The list that is on the screen runs through a number of the programs that are run specifically from the Department for Victorian Communities. Obviously there are a whole lot more across government, but I think these give you some sort of snapshot of some of the things that are happening currently through programs in rural communities and towns.

I picked these particularly because they are where young people are telling us there is value for them. The Advance program is a school-based partnership with community organisations and young people all across Victoria. There is a terrific example in Towong where the year 9 students are working with the CFA to do a whole range of things — reclamation and other things. One of the big pieces of value that comes from that is that those young people are then connected with the CFA, and when they are sticking around in their community after moving on from school they have that link to a local organisation.

Mr MITCHELL — Is that where they are doing their certificate II stuff?

Ms HEALY — It can be part of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning. Certainly the skills they gain through this are part of a curriculum that is developed in partnership with the education department and runs out through schools.

It is a terrific example where young people tell us they get a lot of value from it, and so I must say do parents and community organisation and teachers. Close to half the programs are in rural and regional Victoria. FReeZa needs no introduction, I am sure, to anybody who has been around a while. Again it is a good example of where young people are working with others in their communities planning and delivering youth culture-type events for themselves.

The mentoring and capacity building initiative is worth mentioning, because we have worked across stakeholders outside of government and in government to develop the project with a bit of a Victorian flavour. An example here is in Gippsland. We have put in resources to develop the capacity of organisations in the region to come together to get better long-term mentoring. It is not going straight into individual programs; this one is at a regional coordination level. It builds on what else is going on in that region, where schools, employers and local councils across the region have come together to do that work. It is a support for that. That is the Gippsland Mentoring Alliance.

Another example would be the youth participation and access program from government where mainly community organisations and local governments receive funding to work with young people to create more participation opportunities or reduce barriers in their communities. A good example of that is the Our Playce youth summit in the Moyne shire — Corangamite and across that way; Glenelg and so on. There were a couple of hundred young people coming together across that region to look at what they think is great about their community and the things they want to improve. It is young people being supported by local institutions and networks to do that and actually set down some solutions for themselves and their communities in the future.

Youthcentral is the government's youth web initiative. It is young people getting government information out to other young people and, more importantly, creating community-level information to promote to each other out there. We have a roving reporter model within that. Across Victoria roving reporters are volunteer young people who get trained and supported by us centrally. The roving reporter in East Gippsland at the moment is based in Omeo. If you look on the web site, you can see some tremendous information that has been pulled together down that way.

Mr INGRAM — Who is it?

Ms HEALY — I do not actually know their name, but I can reply and get that for you in writing, I think is what I would say, or you could look at the web site. Young people tell us that the roving reporter model is a great model for the individual in terms of skilling and the way community information is generated.

Finally National Youth Week is another good example where young people take the leadership role in partnership with others in their community to do things by and for themselves that celebrate youth culture and a positive view of young people across the state. A recent National Youth Week project that is worth a mention to demonstrate where young people are taking leadership, learning skills and promoting positive images was in Colac Otway this year with the youth trek 2006. It was a 50-kilometre trek through the Otways organised by young people and others and was particularly to involve newly arrived Sudanese and Chinese young people in the region. It was a nice connecting initiative.

That is just a bit of a snapshot of some of the types of programs the Department for Victorian Communities through the Office for Youth puts out. I will go to the next slide to quickly run through broadly the other ways we work with and engage young people. This hopefully sets the scene for some of the things that we understand we are doing well out there in rural communities and towns with young people.

So a snapshot here on this slide takes us from the local presence teams of the Department for Victorian Communities — the youth liaison officers are roles there that have become key facilitators at the local level — all the way through there to mentioning the youth forums that the government facilitates through the community cabinet process; down through the regional youth affairs networks, which some of you would be familiar with across the state and which each have their own models of engaging young people and then advising back to government; through to supporting the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria and its work — and you have heard about that to day; and recently the Victorian Indigenous Youth Affairs Council, which again has that model with young people from all parts of the state coming together around planning for leadership and support in indigenous communities; and then finally to the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, which we also support, which is a specific advisory body around refugee, newly arrived and culturally and linguistically diverse young people.

A good example of how that last one applies to rural and regional communities would be supporting the Young Leaders of Today initiative through the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues. Recently I was up in Cobram — with, particularly, young Iraqi people — where they are coming together and again trying to say, 'This is our community. How do we work and strengthen our profile in this community?'. So, as you would be hearing through this inquiry, there are a broad range of initiatives out there that, through the department, we support.

Let me share — if I can move on — some of the common themes that we hear when we are out there. Particularly recently we have been across the state, talking with young people, with parents, with business, with philanthropy et cetera about directions in youth policy. Out there we hear themes fundamentally just around this thing about engagement. This is not rocket science; we know that this is about young people being connected to their families, to their peers and broadly to their communities. I am using the word 'community' there in the sense that is meaningful for young people, because often when young people talk to us when they say 'my' community they are talking about people who they are actually connected with very intimately, and then they talk about 'the'

community in that broader sense. That is important, because the way into 'the' community is through having a positive experience of 'my' community directly.

A good example of that is down in western Victoria, in Harrow. People might be aware of the Harrow Sound and Light Show; it may have been mentioned here before. It is just a great initiative. The members of that community, including young people, have together developed this light and sound show, and it creates a sort of small enterprise that not only then brings people into the community and creates an economic benefit but really profiles the involvement of young people in that. It is just a whole-of-community initiative.

Another good example that would come forward from the work we have done with young people across the state is that young people are often saying that where we are involved in thinking about the future — and I guess the other side of that is succession planning — and where organisations are actually thinking about involving young people for the now and for the future a positive lesson is certainly learnt. And it is also very clear in the research through the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme that that is a key feature of how you connect with young people.

I mentioned before the mentoring and capacity building initiative down in the Gippsland area, and I guess Trafalgar is a good example on the ground here. In Trafalgar we have got — again, a number of you would be aware of this — the coming together of the Trafalgar Development Committee through the council, a couple of the schools down there and the local learning and employment network, with young people at the centre of that with some partner adults. There is a lot more engagement with young people who are potentially at risk of disengaging from school earlier. It is hard enough, I guess, getting to year 12 and saying, 'What do I do next?', but that earlier disengagement is a real issue for young people and their families, and the mentoring project down there has certainly started to make a dent in that.

There are other examples — through our work and also in the literature — of things that work. It is where we use connection and culture — positive connection and then positive youth culture — through things like the arts, which are a very powerful tool that young people use for and with themselves, whether it is music or performance. Things like the HighWater theatre up in Wodonga are bringing together a whole range of diverse young people in that community across cultures — and this goes to a conversation I was having before — through the form of art. Again young people tell us all the time that that is such a great binder for them.

Through all of that, can I also mention that the second key theme that comes through in our conversation and also in the research is access — this mobility issue. We often just talk about public transport, but it is fundamentally about young people's capacity to get around. It is not just transport — transport is the enabler — but it is access. For young people with a disability it is, 'How do I do that?'. It is safety. It is affordability — and affordability is very important for young people, particularly those not earning any sort of income, and their families. And then, importantly, it is availability.

With that said, again some great examples of how young people with their communities are trying to creatively address those issues, and the Sale-Fulham campus of the East Gippsland Institute of TAFE is just one example of that, where it is running the additional bus through to Sale to enable young people to stick around longer in their communities if they are wanting to do TAFE.

Last week I was in Kyneton where young people were telling me — these are young people who are studying the general certificate of education through adult and community education, so they are in the ACE system, and for those young people they have different eligibility criteria around discount fares, for example. So there are still some challenges out there with our communities. We are trying to bring that voice to government, share those thoughts.

You certainly could not go through a conversation with young people and their parents, and again their supporters and communities, without coming up against the questions around education and employment opportunities. I point to the example out of the Goldfields Employment and Learning Centre, which has recently tried to address this issue through the Workforce Participation Partnerships. It has brought together — I guess this is under the concept of the Workforce Participation Partnerships; it is employers, so it is industries where there are skills shortages; it is community organisations to enable and support young people; and then it is the young people themselves. So the Workforce Participation Partnerships there at Goldfields is looking to bring up to about 85 young people into the areas around construction, aged care, child care, hospitality, et cetera, so this is a good example of the criteria coming together where you have got the individual support, the support for what that young person needs, whether

it is something like support for transport or whether it is tool kits or what have you, through to the actual real job and something that is sustainable longer term in the community.

One of the other things that we know from our conversations, again with all the people that I have mentioned, is that the profile issue, and I guess the campaign, make your career happen, is an attempt to attract younger people into rural and regional Victoria as part of the Make it Happen in Provincial Victoria campaign. The message in here from young people is about that positive image and about really trying to make young people seen as positive contributors in their communities, which mostly they are. Often the starting point on image is quite the reverse of that, yet in fact from the range of examples today, and I am sure from your own experiences, you would know that that is not necessarily the case. So it is how — young people tell us constantly — we can do more of that; using them to be telling the positive images, using their parents, using their communities to actually tell those positive stories. They say that will contribute to them wanting to stay.

That leads me to perhaps a little bit of a summary around what are the ways to think about this issue that we hear from young people, and fundamentally I want to just go right back to basics here because what young people tell us is that unless we have had a good time growing up there, we are not going to want to stay anyway. It does not matter what you as government do — they say to me — and what great programs you put in, if they have not actually enjoyed growing up here in Corangamite, or Omeo, or wherever it happens to be, they are not going to want to stay anyway. So that sense of positive community engagement with young people in their families, in their communities, in their schools — the social, the economical and the cultural — those three things, those three elements, are all really critical.

Now again, the social, cultural and economics is not the frame, young people tell me. I am just putting it into that frame because often we will focus on one without the other. Parents need the playgroups and the walking bus to enable them to feel connected, and therefore young people are getting a good experience. So that basic thing is really important to start with.

In our Youth Affairs area, I guess we always try to position young people and listen to the whole young person, so I do want to start in that earlier time. And then moving on through school, that sense of connection and school as a really pivotal place in their community, and particularly in rural communities. Often, in a sense, the open school gate is a bit of a starting position anyway. You know a school can be a strong and only major resource in an area, then you use those schools wisely, but certainly young people see that, and the parents we speak with see that, as a really important starting position — that the school is a hub, it is a pivotal place, and it is a place of culture and social involvement and not just a place of learning for the whole community.

Again, that enables young people to feel connected. What young people tell us is, okay, so you are getting to the end of secondary school, making a decision to stay or to go. Fundamentally — again against the sort of social, economic and cultural — it is really critical that young people, if they are then connected, that they are connected in through networks as well, so if they are slow in getting some employment or training, it might be the local sports club or some participation in another sort of network that actually keeps them there long enough to keep having a go. So jobs and training — not just jobs, but jobs and training — employment and training are fundamentally in that, so young people are getting work and getting income but seeing some sense of where that is going. It is not just the one-off, short-term thing. Often we will find with broadly designed traineeships that it can be a short hit and there is nothing more to come, and that let-down is difficult for young people. The mix of the social, economic and cultural is really critical.

A recent example is again down in Moe through the Commonwealth Games. The biggest attended event down there was actually the youth festival that young people with the community put on. It was a great profiler because it was young people-led, and taking any of those opportunities through festivals and what have you to have young people connected is really valuable.

I guess once young people make their choice about going or staying — and you would be possibly aware that, I think it is in the Wimmera area, in fact part of the campaign there was saying to let young people go; they need to go, they need to get some training, some experience, broadening their world, but how do we have them actually come back? What is the attraction back in? They have had the good experience; they need now, for those who want to go for training and learning or to see the world, to come back. The coming back part — they will come back because they have had a good experience, but there is something to come back to. Again, the three things there,

critically, they are coming back to employment, a broader learning environment, so employment and training. They are coming back to some sort of social connections.

An example is what the local learning and employment network in the Wimmera area does when young people are in school. Every year they spend a week involved in starting to understand what is out there in the region, so it is not just at the end, when they are 19 or 20, when there is an issue but building that sense with young people beforehand that there is something here in the region for them to come back to. Then I guess it leads on to: 'Well, you have chosen to stay'. In some ways it is repeating the same themes. You know, there is nothing different other than age-related appropriateness here.

One of the other things I wanted to mention was some of the work we have seen here and overseas on the enterprise side — so it is not necessarily a job — for young people who are looking to take up either by necessity or by choice more of an enterprising-type activity. Some of the programs actually pull together the fundamentals around good business planning mentorship — they are in for the long haul, so they are for three to five years — and, importantly, the access to affordable finance. For anyone an enterprise first up is a big hurdle, but young people particularly do not necessarily have that access to finance, so there are some good models out there where those criteria come together to make for a successful enterprise experience for a young person. Again in a rural town that means they have got that flow-on effect and are creating a contributor to the community and not just something for their own benefit.

In summary, we would said it is not rocket science but about what works, and there are some tremendous examples out there at the moment of where communities and young people are doing this work. But it is fundamentally about young people participating and enjoying themselves from the early stage and not just when there is an issue at the other end.

The Workforce Participation Partnerships is a great example of pulling together industry, employment and training and young people to the centre. I think the Youth Central example gives us a tremendous use of technology that young people can drive and stay connected through and inform each other through. Simple things — simple, small grants like National Youth Week — can make really powerful contributions in local communities, particularly in rural areas; then again, not forgetting the importance of transport there at the end, that flexible transport.

Again, another example is the Golden Plains shire where young people and parents did the weekend stint so you got that engagement. That is probably enough of the presentation from the youth affairs area.

The CHAIR — Could we have some questions?

Mr McQUILTEN — Why are we not helping Lead On? It seems to me it would be a great program and project, but apparently it has not received any government help at all.

Ms HEALY — Through the Chair, I am happy to provide back in writing an answer to that question if that is appropriate?

The CHAIR — Yes, certainly. One thing we hear is that they like to be quite independent of government as far as that sort of thing is concerned.

Ms HEALY — I can only say that Lead On is funded by government but I cannot give the fine details. I am happy to provide that back in writing if that would be helpful.

Dr NAPHTHINE — To follow on from that: the chief executive of Lead On Australia said that too many youth programs segregate rather than integrate — they target youth at risk or youth from multicultural backgrounds, the minority, rather than trying to integrate a whole approach to youth in rural areas — which exacerbates problems rather than solving them. What would your comment be on that sort of problem?

Ms HEALY — The government's policy clearly positions the whole young person in their community and clearly acknowledges that for certain groups there are barriers to participation. Any of the programs that roll out through the Department for Victorian Communities — I will speak about DVC first up if I can — are very clear about pulling together young people in communities. An example would be that young Leaders of Today program I mentioned before about the multicultural youth issues. It is very clearly targeting young people from diverse

cultural backgrounds but also bringing in other young people who do not necessarily experience those barriers, so you have a connection across.

The Advance program, as I mentioned to you, does exactly the same. It is an integrating element. Unless we acknowledge those barriers, then we know the young people — some indigenous young people, young people experiencing a disability, young people experiencing other forms of discrimination — will not necessarily get a guernsey. Our role is to bring them together. Across government there are a number of other programs, particularly in the service delivery area, that often target an issue. An example would be the Youth Substance Abuse Service, and I will not speak heavily about that because it is not from my department, but with the broad portfolio in mind, then yes, you do need to have a particular issue to get into that program.

The policy is that there is a role for both targeted programs and general programs. The youth affairs portfolio is about all young people and trying to make sure that we address the barriers that prevent all young people coming in together.

Mr INGRAM — Following on from that and speaking about barriers, the committee has had evidence that there are barriers to young people from regional areas undertaking tertiary education because of cost and the difficulty of settling in to the metropolitan area. One of the other ones is the cost of living for young apprentices from rural areas during their training component in the metropolitan area. Would you see that as a barrier that needs to be addressed — is that a real barrier? — and does that exacerbate the other barriers we are talking about regarding indigenous people and other sections of the community in regional areas?

Ms HEALY — Our consultation and research would clearly say that the voice of young people and their parents says the cost of coming from rural areas to the city to do whatever, whether it is training or employment, is significant. It is a barrier they face. We start to get into a multiple of complex experiences because if you have another particular form of disadvantage behind that you face a double whammy. That would be what young people and their parents tell us.

Mr INGRAM — The terms of reference clearly show that there are problems, otherwise the government would not have gone down this path. Are there any particular things that the your office has looked at that could potentially be implemented by government if the support was there to reduce some of those barriers and meet the challenges you have identified?

Ms HEALY — I guess the sorts of programs I have run through today are good examples of some of those things. If you take National Youth Week, just as a small example, I think I said to the committee that the small grants in small communities where young people have some control over them make a big difference. I guess there is an issue of scale, and the government chooses to invest certain amounts into National Youth Week in partnership with the national government as well.

The Flexible Transport Connections program is another good example where the department, in partnership with a couple of other government departments, has invested in local transport solutions, and I gave the Golden Plains Shire Council as an example. There are a range of programs out there that are already addressing those sorts of issues. We always get told that there is more we could do.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Is the transport one a pilot project by the Golden Plains shire, because the evidence was pretty strong in some of these rural communities that it is not necessarily coming to Melbourne but going to regional centres and back or cross-connections that are needed?

Ms HEALY — The Transport Connections program that Golden Plains was mentioned in is a pilot program that has recently finished. Recently the transport statement identified Flexible Transport Solutions, which is the program that will then roll that model out further across the state. I cannot tell you at this stage the communities that that is targeted at. I am not aware of those, but again I could provide some information in writing to follow up.

The CHAIR — Is it the transport disadvantaged and remote communities program?

Ms HEALY — That is correct. That has just recently been announced.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — If you could, it would be useful to get that detail.

Mr INGRAM — One of the other issues that has come up is the high cost of service delivery for a wide range of organisations that deliver not just youth services but a whole range of other services in country areas compared to the cost of similar services in metropolitan areas. In the programs you are responsible for do you think the fact that the cost of delivering those services is much greater is adequately addressed?

Ms HEALY — One of the core additional costs, going back to our theme, is around transport. I will use Golden Plains as an example again, because it is an area where there is no large central town; there are lots of little satellite towns. Where we fund into Golden Plains it is only through additional volunteering support that we can provide any additional support for that area. The funding models provide limited additional funding for the additional cost of things like transport, which was mentioned in that example.

Dr NAPTHINE — The inquiry is into retaining young people in rural towns. Does the office have a policy on the issue of retaining young people in rural towns?

Ms HEALY — The government has a policy, we do not have a specific — —

Dr NAPTHINE — What is the government policy?

Ms HEALY — I guess we start off with the GVT line, the Growing Victoria Together goal around strong communities. Then we would go to the Provincial Victoria statement. That would be the next policy setting we would look to in the office, and that is very much about strengthening provincial programs. With any of our programs that are run out of the Office for Youth, our clear direction from the minister is to ensure those programs are addressing rural areas. It is not an office-specific policy, it is broader government policy that would influence our work.

Dr NAPTHINE — Is the policy to actively try and retain people in country towns or to actively encourage young people to go and seek further development and education? What is the policy?

Ms HEALY — The policy is to strengthen those communities so that the young people, with their families, can choose for themselves.

Dr NAPTHINE — Our reference is about retaining young people in country towns. Do you have a policy with respect to that?

Ms HEALY — Yes. Provincial Victoria would be the policy I would refer to, and that is about strengthening those communities to enable young people to have the choice to stay in their community and to enable young people and their families to have the choice for young people to go away and come back. Fundamentally it is about ensuring that those communities are viable and that young people can be active players within them.

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

Witness withdrew.