

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries

Warrnambool – Wednesday 25 March 2026

#### MEMBERS

Alison Marchant – Chair

Kim O’Keeffe – Deputy Chair

Roma Britnell

Anthony Cianflone

John Mullahy

Nicole Werner

Dylan Wight

#### WITNESS

Mick Williams, Manager, Human Resources, the Midfield Group.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website. While all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside of this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege. Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcripts to check.

Thank you so much, Mick, for coming in today and having a chat to us.

**Mick WILLIAMS:** Thanks for having me.

**The CHAIR:** It is great to have an industry and something that is a big employer in this area, so thank you very much. We will jump straight into questions if that is okay just to get the most out of our time. I will head to Roma first.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Thank you, Mick. Mick, you are our first employer that we have had in front of the committee today. You are the biggest private employer in our region. You go right from the supply chain of paddock to plate. We really want to hear from you the nuts and bolts about the challenges you have finding employees, particularly younger people from our part of the region. Having farmed next door to the first Midfield farm ever owned, I would suggest –

**Mick WILLIAMS:** Yes, that is right.

**Roma BRITNELL:** and supplying several sons to your workforce, you certainly play a big part in our region's nurturing of young people through the system. I really want to hear: do we support it as a state, in a government role? Do we make it flexible enough? Do we understand how it is for industry? What can be done better? What about our TAFEs? Are they flexible? Are they listening to industry and what you need as skills to be provided into the skill set that young people need to work with your business right through the whole supply chain?

**Mick WILLIAMS:** Thanks very much. First of all, I would like to say it is unfortunate Kylie Clarke, our training manager, cannot make it today. She is at a Meat Business Women conference in Sydney. She is quite passionate about this. When I spoke to her about coming here and talking, she did make a few notes for me. It is one of her passions. She puts a lot of work in and invests a lot of time, so it is a real focus for her.

We do have our challenges right through the whole industry. As Roma said, we are also meat processors, we are farming operations, we are milk plant operations.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Transport.

**Mick WILLIAMS:** Yes, transport. So there are a lot of moving parts to our business. It appears that a lot of the areas that are focused on in TAFE are trades, not so much meat processing, and that is a real need for us and obviously the farms as well. We go to as many trade shows as we can, we invite schools to come up and see our operations and we send out information about the different roles within the business, right through the business, and we still struggle to get workers or kids interested in our business.

**Roma BRITNELL:** What do you think we could do better?

**Mick WILLIAMS:** Well, I think we focus on quantity over quality for a start. We ran our own field day type thing out at Cooramook, one of our farming operations. Hundreds of kids came along to it – and parents. It was all after hours, and there were about 20 businesses that were there as well. We gave them a lot of information, and those kids really wanted to be there. Unfortunately, others got involved and said, 'Oh, it's a great idea. We'll change it to school hours and we'll get schools to come along.' All of a sudden you were going from quality to quantity. We had the kids really interested in that, and we got a lot of people that wanted positions. Even the businesses that were there got people interested in their business as well. But we went away from the core reason, which was to get the kids that were interested and the parents that were interested in those positions. We wanted to get quantity in there.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Okay. That is a good point.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks. Kim, I will head to you.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Thank you so much, Mick, for joining us. It is really great to have an industry expert here in front of us. With so many employers, it is great to see that you are out there on the ground and interested in coming in to speak to us as well. It is so important that we hear from you. I suppose my question is about the process. I mean, it is probably going around the block a bit, but I am listening. Do they do apprenticeships with you? I am just trying to get my head around it.

**Mick WILLIAMS:** We have a lot of trades apprenticeships. Obviously with the recent changes to the electrical trade that has become more difficult. We actually had to put off three electrical apprentices, which we did not want to do. They were school-based apprenticeships. That was unfortunate. It was because of the supervision rules around the apprentices. We have a variety of trades, but there is not as much interest in those trades as in the electrical trades. We have been struggling to get a plumbing apprentice up at Midfield for a long time. We have advertised and gone out to the schools, but we are not getting much feedback in return.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** It is interesting, isn't it? That is interesting.

**Mick WILLIAMS:** With our farming operations, we do offer traineeships out there as well. Recently we have put on a few trainees out on our property, so that is a positive sign. With meat processing, we get very little interest at all, and there is a lot of meat processing. We have our own RTO on site. We offer certificates II, III and IV in meat processing, but we have very little interest at all.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Okay. I am just interested to hear about the work experience component. Is that an option that you provide? I suppose it is hard –

**Mick WILLIAMS:** Yes, we do.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** How is that going?

**Mick WILLIAMS:** It is mainly the trades again. We do have work experience for the trades and our farms, but there is very little interest in other parts of our operations. Sometimes down at transport there may be diesel mechanics, but other than that there is very little interest.

**Roma BRITNELL:** What is the red tape around taking a kid out onto the farm like?

**Mick WILLIAMS:** It is difficult. Because of our Q fever, everybody has to be vaccinated against Q fever, so there is an obstacle straight away. I believe that sometimes we are put in the too-hard basket because there is so much red tape around what we do. Because we are a larger employer there is more compliance that we have to adhere to as well. We are a lot different from a smaller operation, where they do not have to be signed off on work instructions and inducted onto site. There is a higher expectation on us, and rightly so. We embrace that. We do not shy away from it. But it does restrict us and I think sometimes we get put in the too-hard basket.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Can I just elaborate a little bit on the Q fever vaccination?

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Can I just finish my time?

**Roma BRITNELL:** Sorry. Can you just tell us about the incidence of Q fever on farms?

**Mick WILLIAMS:** Yes. How so?

**Roma BRITNELL:** How existent it is.

**Mick WILLIAMS:** Well, we have not had any.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Sorry, I just wanted to clarify.

**Mick WILLIAMS:** We have not had any instances of it at all.

**Roma BRITNELL:** No-one has.

**Mick WILLIAMS:** It does not apply to other operations. And obviously, we could have our royal show here in Warrnambool and the petting zoo – people will be at that – yet any person that comes onto one of our sites has to be Q fever vaccinated, so it does restrict us.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Sorry, Kim.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Fair enough. That is all right. Thank you, Mick. I used to be on council in local government for six years and I remember hearing – I have always been interested in Q fever and how that actually is managed. As a business operator and owner, how can we give you more support? How can we give you more success in this space? What needs to be done to have a better outcome or better support to you as a business? How do you see that? Are there things we could be doing better? Obviously cutting some of that red tape would be a good start, if possible, within guidelines.

**Mick WILLIAMS:** Yes, that would be good. As I said, we do go out to schools, and we encourage people to come and visit our process and try and get a better understanding of that. I think sometimes when we do get those groups that come through, it is more of a day out than a learning experience for them. When people do come onsite and they want to see our operation, we take it very seriously. As a rule, the general manager, the owner of the business and key figures in our operation take part in showing off our business, because we think it is a good business and we want people to be involved in it. But I think sometimes it is just seen as a day out.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** And just in my closing question, do you have a shortfall of staff at the moment? Have you got vacancies? Are you managing the operation? Is it an issue?

**Mick WILLIAMS:** Yes. We just recruited 44. Twenty-two arrived yesterday from Timor-Leste on the PALM scheme. We are about to lose close to 200 employees through the PALM scheme that have come to the end of their contract. So we are going to have to make a decision as a business whether we try to recruit overseas for skilled meat workers or we go down the PALM scheme path again, but it is a costly thing to bring these workers in as well. People do not realise how costly it is. We would much rather recruit locally than have to bring these workers in, but that is what we need to do.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Thank you. Thanks, Mick.

**The CHAIR:** Dylan.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Thank you. Thanks, Mick. Just quickly, it is more just elaborating on Kim's point just then. I had a look at your job vacancies actually, and they sort of range anywhere from electricians to transport, and I think there are fitters and turners on there – sort of really good jobs and some of them up to \$150,000 a year. There are obviously meat processing workers as well, and I am aware of the longstanding challenge of getting meat processing workers in a local sense. I would have thought that Midfield, in a lot of those occupations, would be a really good and stable place to work for local people. Can you just maybe elaborate? You have got a workforce challenge. I mean, why is that, frankly?

**Mick WILLIAMS:** Are you talking about the –

**Dylan WIGHT:** Maybe all of it from a sort of holistic point of view. Why are you finding it so challenging to attract workers?

**Mick WILLIAMS:** It is a tough environment; no-one can deny that meat processing is a tough environment. I think people's lack of understanding of it probably contributes to their perception. It is more perception than anything else, I believe.

**Roma BRITNELL:** It is physical.

**Mick WILLIAMS:** Yes, it is physical. I have been there 28 years, and I have worked my way up through the business – I did not start off in the HR space, I started off labouring on the floor. We do promote from within, but a lot of people want to start at the top and they do not want to work their way up. They want my job and the owner's job. But we really do encourage growth from within the business. We try to promote from within. It is difficult.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Thanks, mate. I will leave it there, just given the time.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Anthony, I am going to do one more question, because it is a great chance. I know we are going to go a little bit over time, but I think your insights are really important to this inquiry. Have you got a question?

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Yes. Thank you. Of the local people that you have brought on in the past or more recently, in your view, how prepared do you think regional graduates are in entering the workforce? Are they coming in at the standards expected, or –

**Mick WILLIAMS:** No, not really. No.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Please elaborate.

**Mick WILLIAMS:** Obviously, as I said, we are a highly regulated industry, and that is another thing that is probably a bit of a barrier for people as well. You know, it is very strict. Our rules are very strict on how we go about things, and sometimes young people coming into our workforce do not really handle the rules. But the rules are there for a reason: they are there to protect them and to protect the business, and there are country and there are customer requirements that we have to adhere to. Sometimes it is difficult for them to understand that.

I have got a note here from Kylie saying that résumé writing and interviews – they are not very good at that. If they have to be addressed over something, they do not take the criticism well, either. It is a learning experience as well; if somebody does something wrong, you have got to explain to them what the consequences are for doing that. Sometimes that is difficult also.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** So the interpersonal skills, the basic skills – I think we have touched on this earlier, the soft skills.

**Mick WILLIAMS:** Yes, for sure. Resilience – you know, they need to build up a bit of resilience. As I said, I am not saying that our industry is an easy industry to work in because of all the restrictions and all the rules that we have around how we go about things. But I think they need to be a bit more resilient as well.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Do you think that is something we can embed more through the TAFEs and the education system?

**Mick WILLIAMS:** A hundred per cent. Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Can I just ask a question? Logistically, you said you are an RTO onsite, as well, for the meat processing. Do you use this TAFE to also – for the apprentice side of things, you would use it?

**Mick WILLIAMS:** We have done, yes – our trades, in particular.

**The CHAIR:** They come through here.

**Mick WILLIAMS:** Yes. That is right.

**The CHAIR:** Are you finding that people are completing their trades and coming through and finishing, or is there a –

**Mick WILLIAMS:** No, we have not had too many issues there. We have just had one of our electrical apprentices complete his apprenticeship, and he got his A-grade licence today. So we do not have any issues there.

**The CHAIR:** Is there anything we have not covered today that you think – even in your notes from Kylie?

**Mick WILLIAMS:** I mentioned before that Kylie is at this businesswomen's function in Sydney. It is a conference. This is a bit of an example of what we have tried to do, but we could not get any buy-in from the schools. These conferences are held in different states, and two years ago it was held in Melbourne. We went around all the schools and offered to pay for students and teachers who were interested in going to this conference, the opportunity to go and learn a bit more about the meat industry, and not one person took that up. The feedback we got was, 'It's not in our curriculum.' We really do try to get our message out and promote our business, but sometimes we are a bit restricted.

**The CHAIR:** Interesting. Big challenges.

**Mick WILLIAMS:** It is, yes.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Thanks, Mick, for coming. There are about three things that I took out of that. One of them is there are some regulations and the example of the Q fever. We want safety.

**Mick WILLIAMS:** One hundred per cent, yes.

**Roma BRITNELL:** We do not want people getting diseases, and there are diseases we need to be protected against. But with some regulations that you have got imposed on you there is actually not an outcome that can be demonstrated. I think that is what I heard. When we talk about red tape, it is very easy to throw around that term but not know what it means. Every industry I think has examples where we need to hear from legislators to understand how we can help industry, and then even what you were saying just then, that none of the schools around here were interested – you are one of the biggest employers. To have in a region something that is not recognised as a pathway for people to go through is really quite surprising. We need to be aware of what our industries are and feed those industries accordingly or we will lose all our young people to the city. There was one other thing that hopefully has been captured. I am sure it has been, because everything said gets captured. But thank you. It has been very valuable.

**The CHAIR:** We really appreciate your time. Thanks, Mick.

**Witness withdrew.**