

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries

Geelong – Thursday 26 March 2026

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant – Chair

Kim O’Keeffe – Deputy Chair

Roma Britnell

Anthony Cianflone

John Mullahy

Nicole Werner

Dylan Wight

WITNESSES

Liz Bonner, Chief Executive Officer, and

Margaret Reed, Community Volunteer, Cloverdale Community Centre.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries. All mobile phones 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 the hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege. Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check.

Thank you so much, both of you, for coming in today. I really appreciate it. We are going to sort of have pretty much an informal chat, but we will ask you some questions to talk a little bit more about your submission. But maybe if you can introduce yourself, your role and maybe a little bit about what Cloverdale is.

Liz BONNER: Liz Bonner, Chief Executive Officer of Cloverdale Community Centre. We are a Learn Local organisation that delivers around 20,000 hours of student contact annually, and we are also a neighbourhood house. We work in the northern suburbs, mainly with Corio and Norlane, but through our program have become a place for people in our community that have been rejected from others. We are a correction-not-rejection model of service delivery, so we deal with some of Victoria's most vulnerable and complex learners.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Margaret REED: My name is Margaret Reed. I am here as a volunteer doing some work for Cloverdale Community Centre, and I have been very active in participating with Cloverdale over the years. I have worked as a business development consultant for a long time in disability employment services, building those connections between participants that are looking for work that have disabilities and employment opportunities and employers who are inclusive.

The CHAIR: Great, thank you. We will ask you some questions, and it helps us with some information about making some recommendations. I know you mainly work with adult learners. It is not young students that you work with, just to clarify?

Liz BONNER: Yes, and I think this is one of the points we need to raise. We have got a lot of schools making inquiries for students at risk to participate in the vocational taster courses that Cloverdale runs. Unfortunately, though, under the current model they are obstructed. We have to do formal exiting or quite complicated administrative tasks to engage them in an education system that is quite adaptive. The indie schools, the alternate schools, just do not have enough resource, so there are waitlists. So there is this opportunity for us to engage that cohort, but we currently are obstructed.

The CHAIR: You do not. Dylan, I will go to you first.

Dylan WIGHT: Firstly, thanks very much for coming in. Thanks for all the amazing work that Cloverdale does. I know that you have been, you know, working across those northern communities in particular for a long, long time. Can I just unpick that a little bit? When you talk about 'obstructed' – so secondary school students that would like to come to you guys to do some of that vocational stuff cannot. Why can't they? What is the fix there? What has to change for them to be able to?

Liz BONNER: It is broadening the criteria for being able to be a funded placement within the Learn Local network. I think we have got an education model in Victoria that is quite unique. I have travelled the world looking at vocational and prevocational education, and I have not found anything similar. I have been to the UK, parts of Europe, Canada and America on a VET scholarship and previous fellowships and studies. We have this unique product called Learn Local that is place-based community curriculum design – collaborative curriculum design. We work with industry and we work with employment services to tailor, you know, personalised curriculum, and that is really under threat at the moment. But at-risk students who are enrolled in school are not funded.

Dylan WIGHT: Great. Okay.

The CHAIR: Roma.

Roma BRITNELL: What skills do these adult learners in regional areas need to be job ready that you are offering people this sort of training to develop? This is probably a good one for you.

Margaret REED: I worked with Cloverdale and the organisation that I was working with previously, Novotel, a local hotel – sorry, maybe I should not have mentioned that name – around information that would arm people with disabilities with the information that they needed to go through the recruitment process and have them understand what the environment would be like. This is something that Cloverdale delivered in a very short space of time due to their flexibility and their ability to put the Learn Local program together. It is not just Novotel; there are other employers that are also asking for this pre-employment training. Because it was so successful, we still have people employed there – one is doing a traineeship –

Roma BRITNELL: So are these industries that need people, and they are working with you to meet their need and your need –

Margaret REED: That is exactly right.

Roma BRITNELL: To match skills that they need?

Margaret REED: Yes.

Liz BONNER: So this was Ready for Hospitality, with a preparing-for-work element, and we integrated the policy of the industry that we were working with. We run a whole suite of ‘Introduction to’, so introduction to woodwork, introduction to metalwork, building and construction, where we give people tasters. The problem in a community like Corio–Norlane is the hope of what your vocation might be is at odds, because your family history might be that you have got intergenerational poverty and the experience of work might not be there, the value of education might not be there. The question of whether a child is asked in the family home, ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ – we come across a whole group of people who have never been encouraged to dream or aspire to be anything. So we run a whole lot of vocational tasters that are independent of industry. But where we can create linkages to industry – we are working with a builder, as an example, Swift Tiny Homes. We think the context of doing real things with real outcomes is really beneficial for our learners, so where we can, we engage in enterprising. The other side of that is generating income that we can use within community that gives that community and the community development framework the dignity of community-owned and controlled capital, so we can then do the work with that community to make significant change.

The unfortunate thing with the Learn Local model as it is, is it pays for student contact, and it has very inconsistent funding for management. That makes it really hard. So what we see is this opportunity to do greater connection. I used to be a secondary schoolteacher. I can tell you that until I stumbled into this sector, I had no idea it existed and that it was a pathway for vulnerable learners. At my son’s school just yesterday – he is a young autistic man – he was told that he has limited prospects if he does not lift his game with his VCE. I have to constantly combat that attitude from schools, with ‘You know there are other pathways. You know there is Learn Local, and you know you have vocational capacity.’ We need to connect the dots. We have got this model that is just glorious in Victoria. We need to celebrate and protect it, but we need to make it easier and more accessible and promote it. I think it is a jewel in the crown of Victoria as an education framework, but not enough people know about it and how powerful it can be for student outcomes.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Roma, is that all you have?

Roma BRITNELL: Yes.

The CHAIR: John.

John MULLAHY: How can learners from disadvantaged backgrounds be informed about career opportunities in local, in-demand industries and encouraged to pursue these careers?

Liz BONNER: There is a disconnect in employment services, and I think we have got a state and federal model where they are at odds with each other but have common goals. We have a really hard system to navigate, and that is part of that complexity. I think how we map and integrate and share information through our sector could be greatly improved. But I think this issue between the federal service system that funds a lot of the employment services versus the state education system and those opportunities – one idea that we had

was it would be great that the state took responsibility for creating the ‘how to’, rather than Learn Local organisations and a sector that is already stressed having to do all this lead work to sell the product for the state to vulnerable learners. If we had those resources that were state delivered, rather than a threat to how we deliver the system of Learn Local, which happened last year where they wanted to centralise and control curriculum, what would be better is that energy being put into creating a system that connects and makes a pathway for Victorians who are vulnerable, because we should have waitlists for Learn Local, right, but we do not. We are fighting really hard to sell a product that the state should be really proud of. I think the state should do more to sell the product on our behalf. I think we can do better to connect these systems for people, but we can do better to educate Victorian educators and careers counsellors that there is an alternate pathway that does not use assessments, that builds capacity and that is community-in-place designed with industry, with experts – that is really an exemplary model.

John MULLAHY: Excellent. Thanks, Liz.

The CHAIR: Kim.

Kim O’KEEFFE: Thank you so much for joining us. Learn Local, I agree with you, is doing such great work, and we have to protect it. They are not duplicating, they are actually filling a gap. So I think that is really important for all of us to identify. You were talking about career counsellors, and we know that they have a really big role to play as well in supporting and connecting with each other. But what about industry? We have a local nursery here that are very supportive with our disadvantaged or people with disabilities, and they have a really great program of connection. I just wonder, do you feel there is enough industry supporting people with disability, whatever the drawcard might be or the setback might be?

Liz BONNER: I do not think there is enough awareness from industry. I think there is a great understanding of vocational pathways, the traditional vocational pathways, or what we would maybe call mainstream. But I think the issue I face constantly is I have to sell the product of Learn Local before I even get to the engagement in how a partnership could work. Unpacking that, I think we can do better. It is connecting the dots; it is building the bridge. We have got a great product, and we have just got these disconnects from systems, and that includes industry.

Kim O’KEEFFE: Do you think state government also have a role to play when it comes to industry support?

Liz BONNER: Relationships are two-way. I think there is this idea of ‘But we’re little’. My sector, the neighbourhood house sector is running more than half of our sector and deficit budgets. We are really struggling. We need all the help we can get. I think there is this idea of systems efficiencies and productivity gains. What we saw with the PQF+ stronger by design work was a lack of the state government listening to the sector. I do not know how much money was spent on that. Imagine if that was spent on relationship building and awareness raising with industry partners but also the current education system. I do not want Learn Local to not be part of our pathway system. It always feels like it is outside of it. I want people like my son to know that they have a way – that there is no wrong door in Victoria, and those doors are open and available. That is huge for their mental wellbeing. We are big advocates for a wellbeing economy. We ran a big event last night in Geelong that said we have got to not just think about community as a commodity – that we have got to think about these broader wellbeing issues. The system, as I see it, for marginalised people is causing great harm. Part of the biggest role that I have in the northern suburbs of Geelong is dealing with education trauma, correcting what has not worked in the mainstream for people who sit on the margins of our system. How about we said to those people, ‘Do you know what? You have a pathway. You are valuable and you are worthy of education. This idea of lifelong learning is yours to take as well. It is just your journey is going to be a little different to others.’ That sounds fair.

Kim O’KEEFFE: That is great. And thank you so much for the great work you are doing. When you talk about that, are there enough mental health support people on the ground that are actually helping you as well? That is fairly specialised. If you have got people with mental health obviously struggling, I am sure that is outside your scope to manage that. Is there enough support?

Liz BONNER: Not at all.

Kim O’KEEFFE: Okay. That is a problem.

Liz BONNER: We have become specialists in supporting people with complex psychosocial illness. We actually birthed a place-based response, and we have an allied health clinic within our centre. That allied health clinic provides low- or no-cost ongoing mental health support. We partner with organisations like the Trevean Foundation, and we do a lot of work identifying people who are falling through the cracks who potentially should have disability supports – NDIS supports. So we are working in a very savvy, strategic way. We created that program without funding. We were more agile. We came on board quicker than the Head to Health because we used existing assets – neighbourhood houses – and so that program has now grown beyond our centre. It is in WA, it is in Queensland and it is scattered through Victoria.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Good job. Thanks for that.

The CHAIR: I think I have got time for one more question. I just want to know your relationship or your partnership with this TAFE. Obviously you get people job ready, but do you find that you have got a pathway to here as well?

Liz BONNER: We were just talking to Joe Ormeno about that before we came in and that reconnect. Obviously the YACVic sector has had a big hit. We used to have a TAFE–LLEN local partnership that would meet quite regularly. With the job losses in DJSIR related to our sector, those sorts of initiatives have been somewhat stifled. We are going to re-engage with the TAFE ourselves. We have had quite good success. We have won awards together. We are determined to ensure that we have meaningful pathways for our students. I do want to raise an issue with where TAFEs and Learn Locals intersect. I think at times TAFEs try to do more than they need to because Victoria has a pre-accredited education system. We would love to see more of that pathway back into Learn Local from non-successful enrolments. I think we can do a lot better so people who want to learn are given the opportunity, even if they are not ready for TAFE, and we create better two-way relationships. It is hard because we are small and scattered, whereas TAFE is a more consolidated model. We know that we are going to need to be clever and strategic, but I think we could be really conscious of not duplicating efforts in non-accredited training if it is already in our communities through the Learn Local system. I think that is our greatest opportunity in Victoria: to build in productivity efficiencies by mapping our system a lot and being a lot more strategic.

The CHAIR: And there is no point duplicating.

Liz BONNER: No point. And it is heartbreaking to see TAFEs run deficits and know that they are running pre-vocational training that maybe through a Learn Local partnership could be funded in another model. We want to put everything on the table.

The CHAIR: I am so sorry, we have to wrap up, but we could have talked all afternoon, I think. Thanks for the work you do in the community. It really is impressive, and we are very fortunate to have you in this region, so thank you.

Liz BONNER: Thank you for the opportunity to speak. We appreciate it.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much.

Margaret REED: Can I just say one more thing? I just want to say that in approaching employers, even big employers like at the Avalon precinct, they are really receptive to providing information that does make that transition into those employment opportunities a lot easier. They just say yes. We have had three really big employers say that so far, so obviously the beginning of the relationship.

The CHAIR: And like Roma just said, they need workers. We know we have got a skill shortage. We have got to be creative in how we solve this.

Margaret REED: We do. That is right.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much.

Committee adjourned.