

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Warragul—Wednesday, 11 December 2019

MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Sarah Connolly

Mr Brad Rowswell

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

WITNESS

Ms Jane Oakley, Chief Executive Officer, Committee for Gippsland.

The CHAIR: Thank you for attending. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same thing, you may not be protected by that privilege. Hansard is recording your evidence today and you will get a copy of the transcript for you to verify. If you can give us a 5-minute presentation, we will then ask questions.

Ms OAKLEY: All right. Thank you very much. I want to cover off some of the information that I gathered from our members. So I want to talk about the disability cohort, and I am going to refer to some notes, so excuse my head being down.

Employment for many of them and their expectations or desire to work is not quite there yet. They have been used to a strong support system. They have previously had the Department of Social Services and received block funding; apparently that has given them a lot more choice in terms of their work opportunities. Now what we are seeing with NDIS is a lot more of an expectation around transition to work, and most of the jobseekers in that cohort are not job ready or are ill-prepared for meeting those expectations of work.

One of the programs that has worked really well in the disability sector is the I Am Ready program, which was a localised program with the Baw Baw LLEN. This was a program where businesses across the region could support jobseekers, including school leavers. What happened there was there were work placements, so they could come into the work environment and learn in the work environment, and that was quite a successful preplacement training program.

The other challenge for the disadvantaged youth industry is we are finding a lack of job readiness. One of the programs that works really well in the region, but it is not necessarily for jobseekers, is the Industry Placement Program that Federation University offers. What would be good is if this could be applied to disadvantaged people seeking employment opportunities, because what that program does is it gives them skills around how to prepare for an interview, how to submit your CV, presentation skills, communication skills. So it gets them ready for that sort of interview and then going into the workplace and how to behave.

Mainstream cohort. The mismatch between actual salary and expectations, as you would have heard from the Council just before—we have got a lot of jobseekers coming out of high employment, potentially low skill-type job, into jobs that do not necessarily match the salary that they are used to. Some will take them, but they will always have that dissatisfaction that, ‘I am in a lower paid role. I am not satisfied. I will continue to look for a job that is going to pay me more’. Typically these workers have learned on the job, so not all of them have a formal qualification, which presents some challenges as you sort of age and you are looking for job opportunities.

The other thing I want to share, because it was just raised before, is around drugs. I was just talking to one of the businesses who are interviewing someone for the Gippsland Community Leadership Program who works for one of the milk processers. They were talking about employment challenges. Of the cohort that come in for an interview, 50% fail the interview process because of a drug-related connection. What he was saying is that they will do group interviews, they have about 10 people applying for roles in the organisation, two of them from the introduction walk out straightaway and about half end up walking out when they find that there is screening involved and all that sort of stuff as part of the ongoing prerequisite to working at that organisation. That is just an interesting thing that I heard this morning that I thought that I would bring to the Committee.

The CHAIR: Is that anecdotal, or is there some kind of—

Ms OAKLEY: It is a reputable company. They would have some evidence in terms of how many people they are interviewing and who they are turning away. So I think they would be able to provide some more evidence base around that one, which I am happy to share outside of this discussion in terms of the company.

They are some of the very high-level discussions that have come my way. Looking at the unemployment numbers, obviously we have got a high incidence. I mean, these go back to March, but Latrobe Valley unemployment is 8.9%, Gippsland 6.9%, Gippsland youth 15.4%, compared to Victoria’s unemployment rate of 4.8%. So I think it is clearly saying that we have got an issue around the youth area of unemployment, and I

think there is just a lack of opportunity potentially for young people and that connection with what might be available in terms of longer term career.

Ms CONNOLLY: Can I ask some questions around the youth, because that is quite a staggering number. Do you have some comments around transport, you know, how young people are getting to jobs, even getting a licence and affording a car, and public transport, and also around: are employers offering young people opportunities? So if young people are looking for it, are employers pulling their weight and taking a chance on kids and that kind of stuff?

Ms OAKLEY: It is just Jane's view of it, but a lot of the times employers are seeking a young person with experience before they really have that next opportunity. This is why I was talking about industry placement and things like that—at least if we can create opportunities during their training, where students get placed into industry or they get to work for a McDonald's or whoever it might be, they build some experience. I think there is a real opportunity to strengthen that pathway and access to gain industry experience.

I believe there is a real disconnect between higher education and industry, and even schools and industry. I think that is a body of work that really needs further work in terms of: how do we make it easy for young people to access employment opportunities but also understand what is out there, what are the current jobs and future jobs, and how might they be available to me as a young person? I do not think that is clear enough for young people today.

In terms of transport, if you do not have a car in regional areas, you are pretty well snookered. So you are relying on other people to get around. It is probably fair to say our public transport is pretty fragmented and disconnected. For instance, if you are successful enough to get a place at the university in Churchill, you might live here but you have to jump on a train, get to Traralgon and then you have to try and line up bus schedules to get out to the campus. That is a real inhibitor for our area. We have been chewing this little chestnut over for years in terms of connectivity to the university out there at Churchill, and I am a big supporter that it needs a rail connection or a sky rail-type connection out to the campus. It needs some sort of connectivity because it is not conducive to making it easy for young people to access the learnings.

Then when you look at our internet capability, so if you say, 'Well, okay, study remotely', that is really challenging for a lot of young people. Then it comes back to affordability or they live in areas where their connectivity is really poor. We are actually working with the Gippsland digital regional plan at the moment, trying to look at wireless and free wi-fi for communities that are disadvantaged. We are looking at trying to seek some funding to do a pilot and establish that, because NBN internet is out of people's reach—particularly if they are young people or disadvantaged—in terms of cost.

The CHAIR: What can State Government do to encourage more employers? Because without the employers taking people on, it is not going to happen. What are the incentives that we need to have in place? I know that job readiness is a part of it, but what else can State Government do to help employers take up more disadvantaged jobseekers?

Ms OAKLEY: The State Government has done some really good work in the past around incentivising employers to take on apprenticeships and traineeships. So maybe continued work in that space, but I think it is about working with industry in terms of collecting: what do current jobs look like, what do future jobs look like in your industry? And it might be focusing in on what government refer to as the growth sectors in Gippsland. So say, 'Okay, these are the five key growth sectors in Gippsland. We are really going to highlight these sort of sectors, showcase these sectors to community and young people'. You know, 'Did you know you could work in agriculture doing X, Y and Z? And you might be doing this today, but in five years time in that particular role it will look something like this'. So I think it is that communication piece, that aspirational vision piece for young people to see where the jobs lie and everything, and for industry to get more engaged at the school level to be presenting what sort of opportunities they have on offer for young people.

So anything that the Government can do to incentivise industry to engage, because what I see at the moment is when I talk to industry and I talk to the education providers, industry are going off doing their own thing because they are not quite getting what they want from the education providers in terms of training their

workforce. So they are doing their own programs, doing their in-house training. Is that good? Maybe they are missing out on opportunities because that is not their core business.

Ms RYAN: Jane, that is a frustration I have heard for so many years across Gippsland. The Committee for Wellington say, very similarly, that there is a real disconnect between training and where industry is at. Has the Victorian Skills Commissioner done a piece of work around Gippsland? I understood he is supposed to be doing that a couple of years ago to kind of do that exploration of where the major job opportunities are and how training—

Ms OAKLEY: It got parked. Excuse my ignorance because I do not know the history; I have been in this role for about five months. It has been parked, but I have been talking to the office and they are rekindling the taskforce work to look at those sorts of programs. I went recently to a meeting with Office of the Victorian Skills Commissioner, for instance, to talk about Esso getting involved in their taskforce and doing some profiling of current skills. I think they do a two to three-year profile of what sort of skills and jobs will be required in that period of time. So that body of work is off the backburner and on the frontburner and happening is my understanding. But probably one of the things we could do better is we need to communicate that better with industry more broadly. Like it is very targeted in that the office came to me. I have actually gone through my member list. They have sort of said, 'You know, these members here would be really good to work with'. I think there is an opportunity to sort of—not everyone is going to go looking for it on the website and stuff like that, so somehow we have got to do some push marketing.

Ms RYAN: So there used to be the Gippsland Tertiary Education Council, which played a bit of a coordination role I think between industry and a lot of the education providers. Is there merit in government re-examining something like that to try and get the coordination happening?

Ms OAKLEY: I think there is. One of the things that I think is really important is having balanced representation, because a lot of those committees tend to be very heavily weighted towards government folk. The independent or industry voice tends to get a little bit lost in that, so I think if you can get balance and you get the right people from industry in that committee, then I think there is some power in doing that. Because you definitely need someone—and Government is probably best placed here. Just listening to Alan, the Deputy Mayor, talk before, we have got multiple providers across the region, and there lies the problem. Trying to work out where to go and how to access them is so complicated, so you need to make it easy, and it is not easy for people that are not necessarily engaged in the system today. Yes, maybe there is some merit in some form of council there, but it has got to be really an action-based initiative. So rather than potentially talking about the potential, let us get really down to, 'How are we going to make this happen? What are the actions that we are going to put in place to drive outcomes?', so that it is measured and we report against those measures as well, because that is really important. We do not tend to—you are asking about data, about who has been placed. That should be all over the region to say, 'This is how many people we have placed into new roles, into what sectors', but it is not. We have got to be better at marketing that information.

The CHAIR: So in your opinion there are various cohorts of disadvantaged jobseekers.

Ms OAKLEY: Yes.

The CHAIR: You have got the young, you have got the mature jobseekers, you have got disabled jobseekers. Which are the ones that are most challenging to employ from an employer's perspective?

Ms OAKLEY: I think you will get a different response from each employer I assume on that. I really value the older workforce—I think they are very knowledgeable and experienced and all that sort of stuff—and I would probably really struggle with a younger person because they have a different mindset and a different approach and a different way of being. I think what is really important is that is about education of me and how do I adapt my leadership skills to work with young people and the mature market as well. So for me it is about the right opportunity too. It depends on the opportunity you have in your business and who is best suited.

The CHAIR: Just on that, with retrenched workers, for example, in your experience how long does it take a retrenched worker in Gippsland to find another job, and what services do they need to find another job?

Ms OAKLEY: I do not know the actual statistics behind how long it takes them to find employment. I think that is the sort of data that we need to have access to. The Committee for Gippsland is actually undertaking a bit of work at the moment to look at transition across the region and what is being done, where are the gaps, what needs to be done. I think in our assessment we will find that the gaps are that we do not have a strong enough hold on that data and it needs to be recovered.

Ms RYAN: Who would be the holder of that data?

Ms OAKLEY: The Latrobe Valley Authority, I would assume.

Ms RYAN: Right.

Ms OAKLEY: And that is what we are going to investigate: what data do you have and then how do we use that data to inform those sorts of things? I have heard of subcontractors to the industry being out of work for months and months and not quite sure where to go for help. Even though we have had Latrobe Valley Authority set up, they are still not clear or they have gone there and they have felt as though they are not clear in terms of what we are offering them. So they have gone back to either helping a mate do some work on the side, a cash job. You see a lot of that sort of stuff happening, particularly around that trade level.

So I think that is the confusion, and the opportunity: how do we clarify the pathways to help people find opportunities? Who do they talk to? I really think there is a strong opportunity to build a stronger emphasis on the Learn Locals. I did not know much about them until I spent some time with them a couple of weeks ago, and I am thinking there is a perfect entry for a displaced person or someone who has not worked for a long time or someone who does not have the higher education qualification or whatever it is—the whole disadvantaged thing. A great starting point is to start building their level of confidence, play with some of the training programs and then if they then help them to the next step, whether it is TAFE or whatever, I think they could be potentially a very good avenue to help make it clearer for people.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Just on that, you mentioned the LLEN. You also mentioned that program, the I Am Ready program. Are there any other programs that are working to really tailor to the needs of disadvantaged jobseekers and industry that you are aware of?

Ms OAKLEY: No, I am not aware of any others, Gary. They are the ones that have been brought to my attention. Obviously the industry placement program, but that is different—but if it could be adaptable, that would be great. No, I think that is where Learn Locals could be really good. I think to up the ante in terms of community houses and what they offer, because if you are not in that space, you just have no awareness. Like, I had no awareness. Maybe disadvantaged people do have an awareness of those sorts of facilities that they can access, but—

Ms RYAN: Maybe they don't, too.

Ms OAKLEY: Maybe they don't.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes. And do they need more resources? What do they need to actually increase their—

Ms OAKLEY: Yes, they do. They definitely need more resources. The other thing that was talked about at the forum I went to is accreditation. You might be able to have an accredited program where a disadvantaged person has a start there. They get a credit and then they are able to finish that program in a TAFE institute or a university. So I think they need skilling of their teaching force—so being able to attract teachers to community houses. They probably need some additional funding. Again, their programs—the delivery of programs needs to be tailored. Are they the jobs of the future? Is there a linkage there or are we running these programs that really do not lead to anything? So being able to measure the outcomes would be really useful.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, Jane.

The CHAIR: Any further questions? Anything you would like to add?

Ms OAKLEY: No. Thank you for the opportunity. I look forward to hearing about the report and reading it. Thank you.

Ms CONNOLLY: That was brilliant. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you for being here. I appreciate it very much. Thanks, Jane.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, Jane.

Witness withdrew.