

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Ballarat—Wednesday, 23 October 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

WITNESSES

Cr Samantha McIntosh, Mayor, and

Ms Siobhan Dent, Economic Development Projects Officer, City of Ballarat.

The CHAIR: I firstly acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet, and I pay my respects to their elders, past, present and future. Thank you for presenting today. It is a very important Inquiry, and hopefully we will get some good recommendations out of it that will go a long way to finding a solution to the disadvantaged jobseekers at the moment that are finding it really difficult to find employment. 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 things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. If you can give us a 5-minute presentation, we will ask some questions along the way.

Cr McINTOSH: I am more than happy to. I also would like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land, the Wathaurong people of the Kulin nation and pay my respects to their elders past, present and future. And as Julianna knows, I always do make a little comment in that space. Ballarat's history is significant and the gold rush history is the bit that lots of people know about. Not many people realise that we have got 50,000-plus years of Indigenous heritage, and it means so much. And our community are really coming on board and embracing that. I think it is really helping us in terms of tourism product, but also people being connected to our very deep and wonderful community.

The CHAIR: And we are very proud as a state to be starting the treaty process—the first state in the nation to start the treaty process—so we concur.

Cr McINTOSH: It is a wonderful process. And as a part Maori in descent—

Ms ADDISON: Princess—part Maori princess—can you please add that, because I think it is really important?

Cr McINTOSH: A little bit of Queen Sālote in the background—I very much understand the need for these conversations. I do acknowledge you, Mr Eren—Chair—and I know that you are very familiar with our great Ballarat. Deputy Chair, Mr Gary Blackwood; Julianna—everyone in Ballarat knows who you are, Julianna, and it is great to see you here; Sarah Connolly; Brad Rowswell; Steph Ryan; and Kat Theophanous, thank you all for allowing me this opportunity to speak this morning about what you know is undoubtedly an important issue for the regions.

Obviously we are considered a regional centre, and we do represent, connect with and work very closely with the regions across the state—the city of Ballarat being the hub. I often consider, and you would have heard through Regional Capitals Australia, the conversation about the hub-and-spoke model, and we know that it is very reflective across the country. That is how we view Ballarat, the spokes being the regional centres around us and Ballarat being the hub of the model.

In addressing the challenges of sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers it is important to note that across a range of indicators Ballarat is in a robust position. Our city's economy is strong and many of you may have heard our economic output in 2016 was \$12.7 billion, increasing by 2018 to \$14.3 billion, a significant message about the confidence of investment and of new business coming to Ballarat—a significant successful community that really does extend into the broader regions.

Last year Ballarat matched Victoria in gross product, with both the state and the city recording a 3.7% growth rate. Ballarat's unemployment rate, as you may know, has been trending down over the last 15 years; in fact for the past two years Ballarat has maintained a consistently low unemployment rate of 4%. Youth unemployment is 10.2%, however—below the national average of 11.7%.

Ballarat remains a vital service centre for people well beyond our municipal borders, and that does reflect upon that hub-and-spoke model and the need for us to be very responsible in this space, providing many important services in the field, such as education and health for the western region, taking in everything from Bacchus Marsh to the South Australian border. We here in Ballarat chair the Central Highlands group of councils; there are eight of them. We are also very connected with the group of 13 councils as part of the goldfields region, and

there is a number of other roles that we hold as a key driver, supporter and contributor to the economic growth and potential of our city and beyond.

Our population growth remains very strong; it has been around 1.8% to 2.2% over the last decade. We have seen growth—in fact from back in 1966—from around 55,000 people; now we are 107,000 people. There has been all sorts going on in between.

The CHAIR: Doubled!

Cr McINTOSH: Yes. And we are expecting that we will be around 160,000 by 2040, and it could possibly be more likely around 200,000 if the growth rates continue in the manner that they have, but our conservative estimate is around 160,000. We know there is significant growth. We are very proud of that. We are planning enormously well with our new growth fronts, and you will see more of that next week.

We are proudly an intercultural city. The City of Ballarat is in a proud leadership role in this space, promoting inclusivity and diversity in our city. And we were the first Australian city to sign up to Europe's Intercultural Cities program. It is one that has been celebrated by our very broad and diverse community, and we do so with a great deal of pride.

While the overall picture is encouraging there remain opportunities to open pathways to work for people at the margins. And again I reflect upon our responsibility to the broader regions as well. Improvement in our public transport network, for example, can make a concrete difference to improving the prospects of disadvantaged jobseekers. I am happy to talk at greater length on this particular issue with this Committee if you wish. Addressing these challenges and opportunities is vital to ensure that the success of our city can be extended to everyone who makes their home in our city.

I do welcome the opportunity to speak, but I will touch on one very small little point and it was with 3AW yesterday and being asked questions about decentralisation, population growth and the way that the regions respond to these issues. I did reflect upon the town that I was born in, which was Stawell, and back then there was a great deal of work done, in fact on the economic case, to develop Stawell, to help it grow and to work on connecting and making sure there were opportunities for young people to be able to stay in those communities and deliver back. Their goal was to move from a population of 7,000 people in 1966—and I remember the date because I was born in 1965—and it was forecast to have growth of 80,000 people by 1980. In fact today the little town of Stawell, which is very beautiful, sitting at the foot of the Grampians, is around 6,000 people. So it has not grown, and there are still the same issues about employment, a skilled workforce and the like, even though they are doing all sorts of wonderful things with that black space below the goldmines.

My reason for making that point is that Ballarat was at the same time forecast to grow significantly. The difference is we are closer to Melbourne and we have infrastructure that was put in place by those wonderful gentlemen of the gold rush, and that prepared Ballarat well for growth. We are close to Melbourne and we do have great universities, hospitals and the like and therefore better opportunities to help young people and jobseekers develop further. That, I think, is the really important point in this conversation. It is our responsibility as a regional leader and as someone—as in the City of Ballarat—that really does work very closely with the broader regions. There is a big responsibility for us in that space.

Ms ADDISON: Thank you so much for joining us today, Madam Mayor. We are thrilled to have you. For the benefit of the Committee: how do you think that the barriers to sustainable employment vary between regional and metropolitan councils? You obviously spend a lot of time talking to other councils and stuff like that. What is it about the regional experience that is different and how could the Government provide support to regional councils that is tailored for them in this space?

Cr McINTOSH: I think initially to start with it is about that connectivity and accessibility to the opportunities to further develop skills but still remain connected to family, home businesses and rural and regional areas and the like. Personally myself, having grown up in Stawell, I went to university here in Ballarat and I found it really hard. Ballarat to me was the big smoke. So there is a big difference between what happens in the regions compared to what happens in the metros. I just fought and fought to be back in my home

community and dumped my science degree, which was metallurgic geology, and ended up doing nursing because I could do that at home base; I could do that in the hospital in the regions.

The systems have changed a lot since then, and there is a lot more university-based learning, which really does make it difficult if you have not got access to those universities. When I say access it is not just about being on site at the universities but it is also about the transport and accessibility to those universities as well. So even though we in Ballarat have good educational opportunities, there is a lot of pressure on us from the regions. What happens is people migrate here and stay here because they either sever their ties totally or, like me, go back but do not continue with a degree that really would be of great benefit for the rural and regional communities.

So I think transport is absolutely imperative. At the moment there are lots of disjointed versions of transport: you hop on a train and you jump off at Stawell and you change to a bus. And there are nowhere near as many services to the broader regions. There are lots and lots of reasons that people find it a little more difficult and end up tossing in the towel—or separate from their families and do not go back. So there are some big challenges in terms of transport.

I guess role modelling, entry-level positions, all these sorts of opportunities, including apprenticeships and the like, are really important. I know over the years through to the broader regions there has been much better access to university opportunities and I know there have been conversations about study hubs, which I think would be a wonderful way of being able to provide access without it being ridiculously expensive. There is no way we are going to be able to put universities into all of these broader bases surrounding us, but that is where the hub-and-spoke model I think has great potential. You can provide a university service that services the broader regions if we have different models that deliver out via the spokes to those broader regions, ending up having a very healthy Ballarat or Bendigo or any of the other regional cities around the country—and there are 51 of them. If those regional centres are strong and healthy, their broader regions—their neighbours—are very healthy with them. The RAI stats tell us that. There is a great deal of recent research that has been done in this area, and I think that the potential to better develop our university network would help us a lot in these areas as well.

Ms CONNOLLY: How effectively do you think the schools and industry and employers are collaborating together in Ballarat to help jobseekers find employment?

Cr McINTOSH: I think that the word ‘collaboration’ is a really important one that we can all do much better with. I think that no matter how much we talk about collaboration there are often silos and challenges and it is almost a bit of—you know, you talk about Bendigo and Ballarat and they become these silos. You talk about one university or another, or you talk about various schools, and there are silos. There is competition, and competition is great, but collaboration is so important to make sure that everyone can benefit better from different models of learning and different modules that are placed on curriculums and the like. They are not easy barriers to break down but they are important barriers to make sure we transverse.

Ms CONNOLLY: And just on that, whose responsibility do you think that is?

Cr McINTOSH: Well I guess when you are looking at state schools there has obviously got to be a lot of direction and policy from the State. I think even as a local council there is plenty of voice that we have on the ground and we have great relationships with all of the different schools and universities and the ability to move across those areas. But I do think that if there is policy-driven collaboration that comes from the State, it helps cross the boundaries. As you know, there are independent schools and private schools and Ballarat is flourishing in that space. Again, I think there still needs to be that cross-transition and whether that happens through sport or through debating competitions or whatever it may be—performance and the like—I think there are many ways that we can do it. Sometimes it is about attitude and I think the attitude needs to probably come from local, State and Federal Government—from each of the levels—to make sure that people are hearing and respecting that potential.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Just in terms of how you operate as a council—and I know you are well aware of those jobseekers facing disadvantage in the community—have you got any strategies in place to actually assist them or give them a leg up when you are recruiting?

Cr McINTOSH: There are a number of different organisations across our community that start with people from a very young age as well. I actually just met before I came here—and my apologies for being a little tardy,—I met with Sonika and also youth council. They are working on some really amazing projects and delivery as well.

They are great organisations and I think it is about getting youth engaged early on. I just said before sometimes these things are about mindset. Collaboration, whether it be at a professional level or at a youth level, is about getting people into the right frame of mind so they are ready and willing to operate in a different manner. Listening to these young people this morning—I was actually on the radio with Jules and Kris on the local Power FM site—they were talking about many of the great projects that they are working on and they are at the moment planning youth awards on Friday. But they are operating way above where they would normally operate. One of the young women who is part of that organisation is 21, and she felt very old because one of the younger members is 12. She was just saying how much she was learning from this young woman and her will to communicate and traverse multicultural barriers as well. That is why we talk a lot about intercultural networks. We do believe that there needs to be that traversing, not silos of different cultures. We would much rather them all working together.

The youth council and Sonika—Sonika is a group of youth that works on music and performance events and the like—are being role models. They are out there being seen and heard. I think that the challenges again with the different cultures around the city mean we need young people like that leading. I do not think that we have enough opportunity in terms of role modelling. I think that they are great examples. I believe that those sorts of opportunities need to be infiltrated more broadly through our communities and through the rural and regional communities as well. It is great to hear that they are doing that work in Bendigo, and I am aware that there is funding support that comes from government. That is really, really important. I think when you look over history with these sorts of models, there is significant success with the individuals that have been involved in these types of organisations. They tend to be successful beings. When we have seen that history of success it tells us something, and so I think that we should be growing those spaces.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Samantha, you mentioned in the beginning that the unemployment rate was 4% across the board but then 10.4 for youth. What do you think are the factors that are playing into that in particular, and are there any employment services, or should there be, that would benefit youth in particular? Are they working? If not, what would you like to see offered?

Cr McINTOSH: I mean, they are all very difficult areas and there have been many different models tried and tested over the years, some a little successful, some not. I guess consistency is absolutely a success factor. Again, I refer to Sonika and youth council. Those sorts of organisations that have traversed the decades have delivered a great deal of success over time. If I look at BGT, Ballarat Group Training, who have worked in the area of youth and disadvantaged youth over time, there have been funding pockets that will support an employer and then the organisation is bringing in the skill and training them on site, for instance. I think those systems are enormously successful. Sometimes they happen and sometimes they do not. Funding might be available; funding might not. That does not work. It is consistency over a long period of time that absolutely works. I think that those models have been tried and tested and I feel that they are very important and successful models, but there needs to be a long-term pickup and support of those types of products so there is, I guess, a real knowledge in the business community that they even exist. I used that system. We employed youth in a number of examples and they were very successful. I would not have done that had that model not been available. So I guess it is also making sure that businesses are aware. The only reason I was aware was that I knew one of the trainers that was working at Ballarat Group Training—this was probably a decade or so ago. So I think sometimes we need to work out how can we make sure people are aware of those opportunities that are there.

Mr ROWSWELL: I just have another approach to Gary's question, if I may, Councillor. Do you think there are opportunities within local government for local government to use its procurement models to give disadvantaged people, whether they be disadvantaged through their age or through their ethnicity, an employment start in life? Does Ballarat City Council employ such a method, and is there a path for local government in assisting with this problem?

The CHAIR: Could I just add to that? The framework that we have got in terms of the State's social procurement policy, how is that working, and does council have its own social procurement policy?

Cr McINTOSH: Council does have its own procurement policy. Once we start talking social procurement, it is not an area that I have been closely connected to. I am not part of those particular committees. Some of our councillors are and would be able to answer the questions. My apologies for not being on top of it.

The CHAIR: Can we take it on notice?

Cr McINTOSH: Absolutely. Could I please ask Siobhan just to come forward for a moment? My apologies. Are you able to provide any information about our procurement policy and specifically social procurement?

The CHAIR: If you can just state your name.

Ms DENT: Hi. I am Siobhan Dent from the City of Ballarat. I work in the economic development team. In terms of whether the City of Ballarat has a social procurement policy, I am not sure if we have one that is currently active. But when I talk to people who are involved in employment services and services that help people in disadvantaged cohorts, their comments about social procurement—and I will keep them quite high because I do not have detailed knowledge—are that when we are looking at social procurement programs it is important to note that the regional and rural areas are not the same as metropolitan areas. When we are looking at the implementation of programs, things that need to be considered are that although we have some fabulous social enterprises, we do not have as many as metropolitan areas have, so sometimes it can be a little bit difficult to meaningfully meet target levels.

Mr ROWSWELL: If I may just give one example—through you, Chair—a local council near me outsources its land management to a subcontractor. That subcontractor undertakes to employ some people with a mild disability as part of that subcontracting work. But the only reason they are doing that is that council has stipulated that in their tender documents in the first place, so that is a way of engaging disadvantaged people in meaningful employment. Is that something that is a place for councils or local government?

Cr McINTOSH: I think it absolutely is a place. I guess it alerts me to the fact that maybe we need to consider a social procurement policy if we have not got something like that.

Ms DENT: There may be some work already being done, but I am not aware that it has actually been implemented.

Cr McINTOSH: But what I could say is we do have a big focus on—because we have our intercultural cities approach and our creative cities approach and we also have our disability advisory committee and a number of different approaches through that, we do actually employ different groups that have special needs. A real example that is current is recently when SKM went off on a different tangent, we knew we had to act immediately. In fact as Juliana would know, we have had a plan in place since way back in 2010. We activated a trial which we had planned for. We were expecting what happened with SKM to happen, and we were ready for it. We appointed a local group that had special needs workers, and the whole line of workers were employed through BRACE.

Ms ADDISON: Karden Disability, which is now Melba.

Cr McINTOSH: And they were very involved with that whole trial project, which was enormously successful and led us into the delivery of a more formal program. We do a similar thing with Indigenous members of our community, with intercultural focuses and the like. But do we have a social procurement policy? I am not sure. I think many of our other policies direct us to do that, and we are doing that. There are many other examples, but that is one that is current and brilliant.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you so much.

Ms ADDISON: Madam Mayor, I might remind you as well that you have recently appointed your diversity and inclusion officer from August. That is a new role that the council has put on to—

Cr McINTOSH: We have, yes, Nikki Foy.

Ms ADDISON: And also Kirsten Holden.

Cr McINTOSH: And Kirsten as well, yes.

Ms ADDISON: There are new officers there to address—

Cr McINTOSH: We have many other policies that do direct us to act in that manner, but maybe we could refine it with a social procurement policy.

The CHAIR: Excellent.

Cr McINTOSH: It is certainly our intent to be diverse, to be inclusive, and I am very proud of the way that we do that. I do think that there needs to be a responsibility of local government in that space, and maybe different versions of policy could be more directive for other councils that may not have embraced it like we have. There is always more that we could do in that area as well, but it is certainly at the forefront of our mind. We do have committees in each of those different areas that have appointed staff and councillors, and it has led to those recent employment roles—the likes of Nikki Foy, who is an Indigenous member of our community, and also Kirsten Holden, who has led the LGBTI group over a period of time.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.