

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Shepparton—Wednesday, 20 November 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

Ms Amanda Tingay, Manager, Neighbourhoods, and

Mr Michael Carrafa, Team Leader, Business and Industry Development, Greater Shepparton City Council.

The CHAIR: Can I firstly acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. Thank you for being here this morning. Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers. 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 like, you can give us a 5-minute presentation, and then we will ask questions accordingly. Thanks for being here.

Mr CARRAFA: Sure. Once again, thank you very much for the opportunity. My name is Michael Carrafa. I am the Team Leader of Business and Industry Development at Greater Shepparton City Council. Greater Shepparton is regarded as the food bowl of Victoria and contributes 25% towards Victoria's total agricultural output. Our area is also regularly referred to as a growing transport hub, with 25% of Victoria's truck registrations occurring within our region. The local dairy industry also plays a significant role, contributing over 25% of Australia's milk supply. However, the drought is posing significant difficulties for the municipality. Our region is recognised as the most multicultural regional centre within Australia, with over 15% of the population identifying as being born outside of the country. The Greater Shepparton municipality also has one of the largest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations within Victoria outside of metro Melbourne.

Whilst we are proud of our municipality and its many achievements, the region is experiencing significant challenges that require the Government's support and intervention. Our unemployment rate is 4.7%, which is quite good. However, there are many people who are without jobs for various reasons and have significant difficulty in securing a job. Our youth disengagement is unacceptable, at a rate that is more than twice the Victorian level. It is pertinent that youth receive the support required to assist them in exiting a downward spiral. In 2016, 30%—or 2,300 young people—of Greater Shepparton's 15 to 24-year-olds were not engaged in work or study. The reasons for youth disengagement are complex. That creates disadvantage for youth who are seeking or trying to retain employment.

Our region is rich with multiculturalism, and with this comes challenges for many migrants in obtaining work. The Australian culture is very different to some nationalities, where there is an expectation amongst the parents that kids will receive a job offer after earning a qualification. Whilst this may be true in some cases, it is seldom the case, and awareness needs to be increased amongst migrant parents so they can support and guide their children to prepare them for the expectations amongst Australian employers. It should be noted that qualified migrants often do not have their qualifications recognised in Australia, and there continue to be challenges for many in relation to learning the language to a standard that is deemed acceptable by employers.

Our region is rich with Indigenous history and culture, which we as a council are proud of. However, the gap between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people is something we consider pertinent and requires ongoing rectification and collaboration with the Indigenous and broader community. Whilst the country is on track to witness 95% of Indigenous four-year-olds enrolled in early childhood education by 2025, we are not on track to halve the gap in child mortality, and nor are we on track to close the gap in school attendance and life expectancy. These are all gaps that have social and economic consequences throughout the municipality and create negative flow-on effects for jobseekers who are Indigenous.

Limited infrastructure development continues to limit our region's social and economic possibilities. GV Health urgently requires funding for stage 2 for a hospital that has an underwhelming offering for a catchment of over 230,000 people. Our rail services are not at an acceptable standard and therefore restrict our community's ability to commute to jobs that may be available outside of the region. This also applies to youth who cannot afford to live in Melbourne and therefore cannot commute to undertake study in various fields.

Ms TINGAY: My name is Amanda Tingay. I am the Manager of Neighbourhoods at Greater Shepparton City Council. Homelessness and lack of housing stability is a significant problem in Greater Shepparton within our local government area. The Hume Region Homelessness Network report entitled *Homelessness in Goulburn Ovens Murray Region* outlined that Greater Shepparton LGA has the highest number of homeless persons in the Goulburn Ovens Murray region at 833 people. In the Goulburn Shepparton area there are

1,084 households on the waiting list for social or community housing. In 2015–16, 1,300 people sought assistance from one service provider alone in the Greater Shepparton area.

Homelessness and housing instability are significant barriers to securing and maintaining employment. The Greater Shepparton area has poor educational outcomes, particularly within the State school system. In 2016 the proportion of 20- to 24-year-olds who had left school before completing Year 11 was 20% in Greater Shepparton, approximately twice the level of the 10.3% across Victoria. University participation rates among residents of this age group are remarkably lower than Victorian levels. Anecdotally, council has been told that students are leaving school with insufficient literacy, numeracy and communication skills, which quickly becomes a barrier to obtaining and maintaining employment.

The number of people reliant on Centrelink payments is higher than the state average. Council is also aware that the Commonwealth Government's compliance regime is considered to be punitive and is causing harm—for example, local service provider FamilyCare spends most of its State Government-provided funds on assisting single mothers on the ParentsNext program, who have been negatively impacted by the Commonwealth compliance regime.

It is important to note that disadvantage is broad and can include a number of factors. There is currently a fragmented approach to addressing disadvantage. Furthermore, living in Greater Shepparton, with our central area being Mooroopna and Shepparton, we have a number of outlying towns, and transport is a significant issue. There is a lack of public transport to be able to transport people from the small outlying areas into Shepparton and Mooroopna for employment opportunities. Furthermore, the current situation at Murchison, through Murchison Community Care—that is currently in liquidation. That has placed significant pressure on the Murchison community, with potential job losses and potentially the closing of a facility, a residential aged-care facility, and it is potentially placing pressure on a number of ancillary services that Murchison Community Care operates.

Ms CONNOLLY: I am happy to kick off. Can you talk a little bit about how effectively schools, industry and employment services in the area are collaborating to improve outcomes for jobseekers facing disadvantage?

Mr CARRAFA: Did you want to start?

Ms TINGAY: Yes. We will tag team one another. I think one of the big projects that has been working well in Greater Shepparton is the Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project.

The CHAIR: What project, sorry?

Ms TINGAY: The Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project. Basically the Lighthouse Project offers all young people the chance to realise their full potential and thrive. It works in partnership with business, organisations and individuals to provide unique local solutions to improve education and wellbeing outcomes for young people. One of the programs that the Lighthouse Foundation has overseen is the youth haven. So the Haven is in Fryers Street in Shepparton. It is basically a youth recreation space that is open from 4:00 pm until 8:00 pm on most nights, catering to 12- to 24-year-olds, and where people have a safe space to come and meet—to meet friends, to participate in learning life skills, to participate in recreational activities and to hear guest speakers. It is operated by trained youth workers. Also, under the Lighthouse Project they operate a number of collaborative leadership tables, and those collaborative leadership tables look at three different areas: early years, secondary and transition, and a youth leadership advisory table. They are made up of local young people and help to improve wellbeing and educational outcomes for young people from conception through to career.

Mr CARRAFA: And just to add onto that, I think they are doing a tremendous job. They have only really recently commenced, and to their credit they have brought a lot of people together—industry, education providers, all the people that really need to be talking. That includes schools.

Interestingly enough, in the Australian Early Development Census 2018, with all the collaboration and all this effort that has been put together, physical health and wellbeing went backwards, social competence went backwards, emotional maturity went backwards, language and cognitive skills—school-based—went backwards and communication skills and general knowledge went backwards. So in no way am I putting it

down—please do not misinterpret me there—but I think over the years our high schools probably have not received the financial support that they required. Of late we are looking at a super-school, which is amalgamating all of those high schools, which has incredible potential. So I think if the right networks are established there or that support network is established and they are able to see students that are struggling, that need that support, that network is there to support them. I think that could be really positive. Obviously it can happen at a young age with parents and so forth; it is not always necessarily easy to get involved in that, but there is always potential to get involved at that school level. So if that network is established, it could make a difference.

Ms CONNOLLY: On local industry and businesses, have there been comments and thoughts expressed around kids or young people not having the right skills to gain employment in these industries?

Mr CARRAFA: It is interesting. I mean, I think there is a massive amount of opportunity to educate children further on how to prepare for interviews, how to get your cover letter right, key selection criteria—‘What does that mean? Why do you have to answer it?’. Just recently I attended a school to provide a presentation. It was actually going to be mock interviews, but the students decided they did not want to do that. Instead it turned out to become like a panel session where they would just ask us questions. When asked, ‘Well, who’s actually prepared for the session?’, none of them even put their hands up. This is a high school in Shepparton, which I found a bit of a shock, to be really honest with you. I think there is a massive amount that needs to be done in that space.

As far as the Lighthouse Project, one thing that that has done is they have got the various tables that focus on particular categories, and that has various industries involved in those discussions, which is a massive step forward. There is also the Committee for Greater Shepparton, who have a strong industry base, and they are heavily involved in this as well. There is no quick fix. As you can appreciate, it takes time, but there are definitely areas where it needs improvement.

Ms RYAN: Amanda, Michael, you both mentioned public transport and transport generally as being a barrier in country communities. We all know that particularly when kids have to turn 18 before they can get their Ps, they cannot get anywhere. Both, do you have a view on what level of service is required to help address that and to open new opportunities, but has council also given consideration or are you aware of any consideration being given to any innovative kinds of solutions? So some communities have almost rideshare kinds of things. Is anything like that happening locally that you think can address some of those issues?

Mr CARRAFA: A great deal of advocacy is going into working towards improving our transport. At present, obviously we have got surrounding smaller towns that surround Shepparton, and if someone who does not have an opportunity or does not have the ability to drive, does not have a car, cannot afford a car—I mean, that is the reality that people are dealing with. If they are living in Tatura, as an example, 20 minutes away as a drive, they cannot get to Shepparton to work and then get home after 5 o’clock or 5:30 pm, because those services just are not available. So what options do people have?

In terms of innovation—do you have anything in relation to—

Ms TINGAY: Yes. Tatura were looking at the possibility of doing a carpooling-type system. I am not sure where that got to, but at the end of the day that relies on individuals being comfortable to do that. I am sure informally it happens, where people need a lift because of different circumstances or to get to work, but Tatura were looking at doing something. There were discussions a long time ago about potentially people accessing the school bus, but there were a number of different challenges, as you would appreciate, around that, so that did not get off the ground. I think there is a carpooling system in the Mansfield area?

Ms RYAN: Yes.

Ms TINGAY: Yes, and I think they have been quite successful in that program. Tatura were looking to do something similar to that. But once again it needs individual people to be able to give time to participate in that program.

Mr ROWSWELL: It also needs leadership, though, as well. So does council have a role in that or is that a state government responsibility? Who brings that together?

Ms TINGAY: We can certainly help support it at a local level, but at the end of the day it is not a program, essentially, that council would be facilitating or running. We would support the community in a way to get that up and going, with whatever checks and balances they needed in place to ensure that that could happen. That is not necessarily something that we would provide funding for, but we would support it and advocate for community to be involved.

Mr CARRAFA: And I guess, we are all for innovation, thinking outside the square and talking possibilities with community, but ultimately you need a sustainable model at the same time. When relying on volunteers, it might work in the short-term, but is that the long-term solution? I do not know.

Ms RYAN: So in terms of public transport, what does a sustainable model for Shepparton look like? What level of service does the city believe it needs?

Mr CARRAFA: I think at a minimum, and Amanda will be able to feed into this as well because she works really closely with the small towns from a community-strengthening perspective, that kids—well, not just kids—people who are in a position where they cannot afford to drive, they do not have a car, at a minimum they need to be able to get to Shepparton before 9 o'clock to be able to start work so they can arrive at wherever they are planning on working. And what is the standard time people are finishing work—5:00 pm or 5:30 pm? People need to be able to get home around that time as well, so it allows for people to work, which is a real challenge already in our municipality, as we have mentioned.

Ms TINGAY: Yes, I would agree. Obviously Greater Shepparton has a number of small towns that feed into the city centre, where the majority of the work is in Shepparton, and in Mooroopna, so a service that is able to support getting people from outlying towns into the municipality by 8:30 am or 9 o'clock and then home on a service at 5:00 pm or 5:30 pm would certainly be advantageous for our community.

I think then there are a number of, I guess, ancillary conversations to have. One of the Government's programs at the moment that I have seen has been extended for funding is the L2P program. I think for kids who have experienced levels of disadvantage, they may not be able to get their licence because they have not acquired their 120 mandatory hours of driving, and this program assists them to do that. I think Berry Street are running that program here in Shepparton. So it is being able to access that program as well by bringing people into the Shepparton centre—a service that is more flexible and that is well funded to provide that flexibility that our community need.

Ms ADDISON: Michael, you raised the issue of qualified migrants and the rich multiculturalism, which I saw firsthand at the lake last night, which was beautiful. We have heard from other people who have presented to us of this problem of the recognition of international qualifications. What do you see that the Victorian Government could do to assist people having their international qualifications recognised? What could we be doing?

Mr CARRAFA: Look, that is a difficult question. Admittedly, I am not an expert in it. You know, it is sort of being able to communicate how we go about further understanding or recognising qualifications. But I think something needs to clearly happen in that space. People are coming qualified with the experience. It is just a matter of obviously recognising it in some way, shape or form rather than sort of getting someone to start from scratch again, which is not ideal, particularly for someone's confidence as they enter a new country.

Ms ADDISON: What the Dandenong community told us was that there is a real lag and that it is taking far too long for people, which means they are out of their industry there. They are not getting their ongoing job experience and stuff like that. They suggested that we could do something in terms of time frames to try and speed up the process. Do you think that could be beneficial for the Shepparton community?

Mr CARRAFA: Absolutely.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thank you, Amanda and Michael. We have heard a lot in this Committee about the success of place-based approaches to disadvantage and looking at the opportunities that are available in places like Shepparton. You mentioned your agricultural sector. And then looking at the forms of disadvantage, you mentioned youth unemployment and the multicultural population. Do you know of any models where those are

intersecting in a place-based sort of way, where you have got industries that are actively engaging with those cohorts to try to bring them in and address some of these issues?

Mr CARRAFA: A good model—and it is in its infancy—as we mentioned earlier, is the Lighthouse Project. I think what has become a reality of late is getting so many people involved and people understanding the issue that it is a reality within our municipality. People have become quite passionate about it, and they are now on tables, and they are talking, and they are working together. Previously I do not think we had that to a great degree, and now you have got industry getting involved and being part of the solution. I think that is a good model. I think the Committee for Greater Shepparton is a good model as well. It would be worthwhile exploring that. I think Sam Birrell is presenting later today as well, so it would be a good question for him. They have a membership base, and they have got high-level industry involved in that as well. Place-based—there is a massive opportunity to build on that, and there is no one solution that is going to fit all areas. We are all unique in our own merit. I definitely think it is something that needs to continue to be pursued.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Do you see councillors having a role in brokering that relationship between industries and disadvantaged jobseekers?

Mr CARRAFA: I think there is an opportunity for council to be involved. I find what works better is when you have—see the Lighthouse Project. I just find at times when council is involved there is almost this reliance on council just to make it work. It is not realistic and it is not practical, because you need more than that. It is not just about council. It is involvement from all different directions and all different levels. The Lighthouse Project has received some good funding from the Government, and it has been able to sort of broker those relationships. Does council have an involvement in sort of coordinating it? In my view, probably not. However, we can have an involvement in facilitating or creating those connections, but not necessarily leading it in my view. That is only my opinion, based on what I have seen in the past and what I think works. There needs to be that ownership. It cannot just be council.

The CHAIR: Governments have huge leverage in terms of contracts when they require some work done, and council obviously is a tier of government that gets a lot of work done, as does the State Government. We now have social procurement policies in place, because I think if you do not inherently put that into the contracts with the private sector, it is all too hard to achieve some of those objectives that we want to achieve. How is council's social procurement policy?

Mr CARRAFA: At the moment—are you familiar with GROW?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Mr CARRAFA: So I think Leanne is presenting—

The CHAIR: It started off in Geelong. My town.

Mr CARRAFA: Oh, there you go, of course. So there is massive potential there. Quite often it is possible for councils to become a bit jaded and not be totally in touch with industry. I would like to feel like that is not us. However, what GROW is doing, and obviously you are familiar with it, is facilitating those discussions. It is having those chats about how important it is to support local industry. As far as where council sits, in terms of what is embedded into our procurement policy, social aspects, environmental aspects, local economic aspects are considered favourably as well. But in saying that, I think we need to build on that. And contracts that are made available, they need to be formatted in a way that enables local industry to get involved rather than large players external to the municipality being able to do two or three things that smaller operators within the municipality can do individually, if that makes sense. If someone comes in and does it all, unfortunately it can leave locals for dead, and we need to try and avoid that.

The CHAIR: So you have a social procurement policy?

Mr CARRAFA: I do not know if it is a social procurement policy, but I think within our procurement policy that social element is embedded—

The CHAIR: A requirement of a certain amount of apprenticeships in disadvantaged areas?

Ms TINGAY: Yes.

The CHAIR: Some jobseekers from these disadvantaged areas having the opportunity—do you have that social procurement policy?

Ms TINGAY: Probably not to that level of detail. Whilst we do have local economic impact and we do have weightings that are tested to our contracts as they are let and as they are tendered for, we are more project-specific—

Ms ADDISON: So for example, with the new SAM—

Ms TINGAY: Our museum, yes. So the requirement around the social procurement for that—

Mr CARRAFA: So many Indigenous people.

Ms TINGAY: So many Indigenous people, so many apprenticeships that need to be had throughout the life of the contract, the local economic impact. I think they are tailored more to each individual project.

The CHAIR: I think it is important, because local government plays a big part in social procurement, particularly in areas like Shepparton, and you are a major employer. Our framework of social procurement—are you aware of the State Government framework?

Mr CARRAFA: Me personally, no.

The CHAIR: Okay. So would you be inclined to work with the State Government in relation to coming up with a social procurement plan for local government?

Mr CARRAFA: I think it is something that we can take back.

The CHAIR: Because I think the partnership is important.

Ms TINGAY: Yes, and we will double-check our policies.

Mr CARRAFA: It is definitely something we can take back and have a discussion on.

Ms TINGAY: And we are also a signatory to the Algabonyah agreement. I am not sure if you are familiar with the Algabonyah agreement. That agreement is across the Goulburn-Murray area with a number of local employers to increase Aboriginal employment across the Goulburn-Murray. The target for that is 2%. We have reached that 2%, and we are looking to nurture and grow and continue our commitment to that project.

Ms ADDISON: I am pleased to hear that the unemployment rate is 4.7%. Whilst you have got that terrible figure of 2,300 people between 15 and 24 not working or studying, are you finding that the positive impact of the labour market and low unemployment is having an impact on disadvantaged jobseekers?

Mr CARRAFA: For me, I think not, to be really honest. As an example, a report was released just recently—chances are you have heard of it. It is called *Smashing the avocado debate*, and it was released in March 2019. It has the 20 regions with the highest youth unemployment rates in Australia, and Greater Shepparton is seventh. That is testament to how significant our situation is. I would like to think this low unemployment rate would be having positive flow-on effects for youth, but for me I question whether it is.

Mr ROWSWELL: I think you have articulated the problems very well, but we are here about solutions. We are here to try and hear from people—picking up the Parliament and bringing it to the regions to find out through your own eyes, through your experience here on the ground in the community, what you need us to do to try and help you have a better youth employment rate, a better youth participation rate. So what can we do?

Mr CARRAFA: At the moment a state-of-the-art super-school is being established.

Mr ROWSWELL: I am very familiar with it.

Mr CARRAFA: Absolutely. I think the Government needs to deliver on that, and deliver that as originally promised—that it will in fact be state-of-the-art. That includes the services to support kids—to support students. At the moment I wonder—

Mr ROWSWELL: So have you sought assurances about what that actually looks like, what support services will be included and what state-of-the-art means?

Mr CARRAFA: It is about having those networks. Career teachers at the moment are an example. Career teachers are not just career teachers; they are also maths teachers, and they are teaching English as well. How seriously are we considering careers when teachers are having these enormous portfolios without being able to sort of stick to that? That is one thing. I would like to hope that the super-schools focus on that and guide kids based on their skills, based on their interests, because when you are dealing with large schools and career teachers are doing more than just career teaching, that becomes difficult.

Ms RYAN: Given that, Michael, have you got any assurances around time lines for funding for that project?

Mr CARRAFA: No, I do not believe so, not at this point. Obviously they have committed that initial funding amount, but as far as the further finances that are required, I do not believe so. Also I guess we need that assurance that what was initially proposed is going to be delivered.

Mr ROWSWELL: Well, if council is seeing this as a solution to some of the current problems that you are facing in this community, I would encourage you to seek rock-solid, ironclad assurances from the State Government that this is in fact what will be delivered, whether it be high-tech or whether it be the increased number of careers counsellors specifically designed to work with young people, to walk alongside young people, in their vocational journeys. If that is what you feel you need this school to deliver, I would be seeking those assurances now.

Mr CARRAFA: Absolutely, and we are communicating that through the Lighthouse Project and the tables that are in place there. It is supporting kids to go and pursue apprenticeships and connecting them. It is more than just sort of making them aware of careers; it is guiding them, it is taking them on that journey. I appreciate what you are saying, and absolutely, it needs to be a priority that is communicated and spoken loudly.

The CHAIR: Can I just ask about your recruitment practices? How do you assess in terms of when you recruit people through your council? Do you take into consideration postcode and disadvantage or just the skill sets that you require?

Mr CARRAFA: Look, it gets difficult. I guess it is a question for our HR department. Obviously we deal with the HR department, but I am not within that department. It depends greatly on the role too.

Ms TINGAY: For about the last two years we have had an Aboriginal Employment Officer, and we are doing a lot of work in that space to ensure that our organisation is culturally appropriate and culturally safe for Aboriginal community members to come and work in our organisation. We are ensuring that our officer meets with potential applicants beforehand and explains the process. The key selection criteria can become very daunting for people, so it is guiding them through the process. Our HR department, whilst not writing applications, assists people in the process of what to expect as part of the process. Whilst we are on a merit base in terms of employment, we do have special measures positions, particularly in the Aboriginal space, that we do offer, and we have our officer there to assist. So we are making our organisation culturally safe and making our organisation one that people want to come to work for. We have got roughly a total headcount of about 950 employees, so we are probably the second or third largest employer in Greater Shepparton. We want to make sure that we are a welcoming environment and a welcoming organisation. We employ anyone from casual lifeguards—some still school age—through to engineers through to accountants. We have got a whole range of skill sets that we need in our organisation. So making our organisation as welcoming as we possibly can for all people is something that is very important to us.

The CHAIR: Very good. Thank you very much for attending.

Ms TINGAY: Thank you.

Mr CARRAFA: Thank you for the opportunity.

Witnesses withdrew.