

LAW REFORM, DRUGS AND CRIME PREVENTION COMMITTEE
**Inquiry into the supply and use of methamphetamines, particularly ice,
in Victoria**

Bendigo — 25 October 2013

Members

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Witnesses

Ms P. Gordon, Director, Community Wellbeing, Greater Bendigo City Council.

Ms S. Mansell, Manager, Community Partnerships, Greater Bendigo City Council.

The CHAIR — Welcome to this parliamentary inquiry. This is the Law Reform, Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee. We are conducting an inquiry into the supply and use of methamphetamines in Victoria, particularly ice. We thank you for your time. We understand that it is a short piece of time — 1.15 to 1.35. Pauline, you are the director of community wellbeing?

Ms GORDON — That is correct.

The CHAIR — And Suzie, you are manager of community partnerships at the Bendigo city council?

Ms MANSELL — That is right.

The CHAIR — There are conditions in relation to you presenting evidence to this committee this afternoon. I will just read you those. Welcome to the public hearing of the Law Reform, Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, the Defamation Act 2005 and, where applicable, the provisions of reciprocal legislation of other Australian states and territories. However, it is important that you note that any comments you make outside the hearing, including effective repetition of what you have said in evidence, may not be afforded such privilege. Have you received and read the guide for witnesses presenting evidence to a parliamentary committee?

Ms GORDON — Yes.

Ms MANSELL — Yes.

The CHAIR — It is also important to note that any action that seeks to impede or hinder a witness or threaten a witness or the evidence they would give or have given may constitute and be punishable as contempt of Parliament. We are recording the evidence and will provide a proof version of the Hansard transcript at the earliest opportunity so you can correct it as appropriate. As you can see, the media are present. You would like, as I understand it, to make a very brief presentation to the committee, and then we would like to ask some questions of that presentation. Thank you for coming here.

Ms GORDON — Thanks, Chair, and panel members. It was great to be invited. Our presentation will be very brief in terms of our role. The City of Greater Bendigo council has responded to community concern about drug use during 2013. This originated through issues raised by community members about the sale of synthetic drugs in Bendigo. Council moved a motion to take a range of actions in response to this concern, which included lobbying state and federal governments about this issue, encouraging local retailers to remove these products from sale and initiating a community campaign to provide information and education about drug use.

The City of Greater Bendigo's community wellbeing unit and director has the responsibility of leading this response. The role of the directorate is to support people in our community to live their lives fully and be active, creative, engaged and healthy. Since June we have been working on a community campaign which has involved engaging local health and community service providers who are experts in alcohol and drug use treatment. I am going to hand over now to Suzie Mansell, who is leading that through our organisation.

Ms MANSELL — Thank you. We decided in response to the concern raised by the community that we would form a partnership to look at how we would approach this issue, because council has a natural role in planning and facilitating how to respond to the community but we are not subject matter experts. We thought it would be best to involve other organisations who are working in health and community services and involved in alcohol and drug treatment.

We are also involved in — we facilitate a safe community forum, which involves a range of organisations that are licensees and health and community service organisations. We drew on that group to form a subcommittee to focus on this area. It was decided that the best approach was to — rather than focus on one particular type of drug, it would be better to broaden out our approach and focus on all drugs because at different times any drug can be an issue in the community. So we met

as a partnership group and formulated a plan on how to tackle this to provide information and education with a focus on prevention in the work we did.

The partnership we have formed includes local organisations such as Bendigo Community Health Services, Victoria Police, youth support services, Youth Support and Advocacy Service, Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co operative, Bendigo Health, St Luke's, the Salvation Army and the Department of Justice regional office. The group has been pivotal in developing the community engagement we have embarked upon to address this issue, and we have done that in a range of ways through this community campaign we have developed.

What we are trying to do is reduce the likelihood of people embarking on problematic drug use. That is our broad goal. We would focus on some key messages through media campaigns and education forums, both to professional workers and through free forums available to the community, with factual information about drug use and information about where people in the community, whether you are directly affected or a family member or friend of someone affected by problematic use, can have access to education and information. We are trying to create something that is ongoing, rather than having a targeted or reactive approach. As a partnership we nominated the CEO of Bendigo Community Health Services, Kim Sykes, to be our spokesperson, as we believe that Kim has credibility and great expertise in this area. Over time Kim has provided a number of interviews through the media and has kept this message going and raising awareness.

We have provided two professional forums for professionals working with young people in the Bendigo regional area. One was about ice specifically and the other was about more general drug use and how to work with and support young people who may be affected by problematic drug use. Currently we are planning a forum for 14 November. It will be a free community forum delivered by local service providers. In planning that forum we decided the best way to make sure we were providing the right information was to conduct a community survey and ask people what they would like to know. Those survey results show that the main things that people are concerned about are the types of drugs that are available in the community, the effects of those drugs and why people use them, the legal issues associated with illicit drugs and the support services that are in our local community. We are planning the forum around those aspects. We will put together an expert panel involving our partner organisations. We are planning the forum so that we cover all those areas. We will also do an assessment or evaluation afterwards to see if we are meeting the community need with that kind of information.

When we became aware of the focus on ice by the Department of Justice and Victoria Police and the particular heightened concern at the moment and interest in running a campaign, we became involved in that and supported it through this local partnership approach. We have been in the background providing support for the forum that was held last night. We are working closely with the Department of Justice and Victoria Police on learning from what they have delivered and what they felt was valuable from that and hopefully translating it into future actions of the partnership and the way that we run the community forum next month. I might hand over to Pauline to talk a little bit further about that.

Ms GORDON — On where to from here, the City of Greater Bendigo will continue to facilitate and support a local partnership approach. We were certainly in attendance at the forum as well. We congratulate you on hosting that forum. We believe in that partnership approach to community action about problematic use of alcohol and other drugs. We are also in partnership with Bendigo Community Health Services in the Healthy Together Bendigo program. We are one of the 14 local government areas that has formed the partnership, and one of the issues that we are tackling is alcohol and other drugs, in addition to obesity and nutrition. We do have some mechanisms to provide some support through our existing mechanisms. Of course our approach going forward will be shaped by the outcome of the forums, the work that you are doing here, some of the outcomes of the forums and any other resources that are available to sustain this work. We are happy to be involved.

The CHAIR — Given all the work that you are doing, the forum last night in Bendigo and the proposed forum the city council is running, is that on the basis that you are concerned about the escalation of amphetamine use in Bendigo? We have been told that there has been a

crisis in the use of the drug, that it has sort of become an epidemic. I am just wondering where the Bendigo city council is sitting in response to previous forums and now your own forum. Do you see an escalation in the use and impact of a new drug into the Bendigo region that is causing you concern to be more proactive in the space of community engagement?

Ms GORDON — I think what occurred was attention was drawn to the use of synthetic cannabis. That was the first response to council itself. That was through one of our elected representatives, who raised that as a concern and we investigated what was occurring both here in Bendigo and across Victoria and Australia. As part of that, when we did our research in conjunction with our partners, Bendigo Community Health's substance advisory service, they indicated that the prevalence of ice was perhaps of more concern. In terms of an increased knowledge for us as a council, we are not seeing that, but we certainly take our advice from our local partners. They said that if we were going to conduct forums perhaps that would be one they would be more interested at the time. So we have taken the approach that we are looking at both ice and other drugs in terms of our overall view of how we approach it. I might get Suzie to add anything if she needs to.

Ms MANSELL — No. I think that really covers it in terms of responding to community concern, actually, and then we were responding to other service providers. We are not involved directly in terms of providing a service, and it is more difficult for us to comment on that.

Ms GORDON — The only service that we may have information around is our maternal and child health service. We average approximately 1300 birth notifications a year. When speaking to my staff in that area, they have indicated that approximately 10 per cent of those 1300 clients would present with a drug issue, but we do not necessarily have the breakdown of the ice statistic of that. Certainly drug use as a client issue has increased over the years. What the substance might be, I could not provide that information.

Mr SCHEFFER — I am sorry I was a little late for your presentation. I caught just the last part of what you, Pauline, were saying about the forum last night, which I could not attend. Was the city instrumental in organising that last night?

Ms GORDON — No. That was certainly done by the Department of Justice.

Mr SCHEFFER — I see. I was going to ask you some questions about that, but I will let them drop for the minute.

Mr CARROLL — Thanks, Pauline and Suzie, for your presentation, and well done on having the forum on 14 November. I was thinking about what could be more sustainable for local government. We have not yet had much presentation to the committee from the local government sector. For a lot of people it is where to go for help. Are you looking at putting together an alcohol and drug policy? Are you also looking to do anything online with your website and things like that, where people could get help? You probably think that that is more in the domain of the state government, to be doing that.

Ms GORDON — Not at all. Council as late as this week has adopted its health and wellbeing plan. Most of the agencies we have been discussing that with that are in partnership with us have been part of preparing a plan. I can certainly have that sent forward to you as well.

Mr CARROLL — That would be good.

Ms GORDON — A number of actions in that are attributed to the specific organisations as well, so it is not just a council plan; it is a whole of Greater Bendigo plan. As I said earlier, we have the Healthy Together Bendigo initiative. That is through the state government and in partnership with Bendigo Community Health Services. We would look at any information provision that we can provide, particularly, as Suzie said, around education and prevention, and really how we inform our community about what is available to them I think is really important. Council does see itself as being an advocate, first and foremost, for our partners and as a mechanism to inform the community about what they want to know.

Mr CARROLL — Do you have that on your website? I know that you have council directories and things like that in hard copy. Do you have a big website?

Ms GORDON — The health and wellbeing plan will have been put on there. I have not been in the office today. It was only adopted on Wednesday night, but generally they are all available for anyone to download.

Mr CARROLL — Fantastic. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Will council be involved in the action plan that was mooted last night in relation to those key stakeholders?

Ms GORDON — I would go so far as to say that I actually think you could utilise existing networks or forums, such as the Bendigo Safe Community Forum, which is really the key link for all partners to be involved with all community safe issues. As Suzie identified, the partnership group has evolved as a subgroup of that community safe forum, so I would encourage you — if that is the direction we are going, where there is going to be the development of an action plan — not to reinvent the wheel. Bendigo is such a passionate community that the actual leaders and stakeholders of each of those organisations work closely together, and we are all involved in the same groups all the time. So it is as much about not reinventing the wheel as it is about using some of the existing mechanisms, perhaps, to see that come to fruition.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your time this afternoon.

Ms GORDON — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.