

PARLIAMENTARY ENQUIRY INTO REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

Relevant Term of Reference: Examining the effectiveness of existing regional service delivery and development programs.

Good afternoon. Having grown up, and currently living, in the Great Southern region of Western Australia, I am very aware of the disadvantages faced by Australians living outside the major urban centres across the country. I have recently had discussions with a member of our local community about some of the challenges in obtaining employment in rural areas. These challenges extend to the difficulties associated with obtaining unemployment benefits such as the Newstart Allowance from Centrelink. People are required to apply for anywhere from 5 to 20 positions per month to receive this allowance. There may also be requirements to undertake a certain number of hours of volunteering, engaging in approved courses of study or undertaking work experience.

There are always people prepared to report the system so I am very aware of the need to have in place a robust system for ensuring that claims for government unemployment and other benefits are genuine. My concern is for those members of our local communities who are in genuine need of these benefits.

Gnowangerup is a small town of 600-650 people, and there are many towns of similar size or smaller throughout Australia. There are a limited number of businesses in the town and therefore a limited number of employment opportunities. There is an even smaller number of employers who would find it practical to participate in work experience programs. As an example, the Shire has been reticent to host trainees or provide work experience because we already run a lean team and do not have the resources to supervise these programs. The outcome is that locals find it increasingly difficult to either find work or satisfy Centrelink requirements for the Newstart Allowance. They are forced to spend limited financial resources on fuel to travel to larger centres - possibly Katanning but more likely Albany or Perth – to achieve these objectives. Having to use the allowance to qualify for the allowance does not seem like a fair system at all.

I have also heard that some of the employment organisations in Katanning (the next largest town in proximity to Gnowangerup) contracted by Centrelink insist on applicants visiting their offices in person when contact by telephone (or email) would eradicate the need to spend money on fuel for the journey.

If a person has lived their entire life in Gnowangerup, owns a house here, and is over 50, it is to be expected that they would prefer to continue living here. The relatively low value of properties in small towns, in itself, would prohibit a person from moving to a larger town or city on a permanent basis.

Local Government provides many services and facilities to its residents. One of its more important roles is to lobby other tiers of government on behalf of community members to assist with matters that it cannot satisfactorily address. I am eager, therefore, to find options for increasing flexibility in unemployment benefit requirements.

One suggestion that may not be difficult to implement is to allow local governments and/or Community Resource Centres to identify job seekers and accept the appropriate documentation from them. The documentation could then be emailed to Centrelink without the job seeker having to spend valuable money on driving to the nearest Centrelink agent. In the case of job seekers in Gnowangerup, it is a 130km round trip from Gnowangerup to Katanning and return.

Thank you for your consideration of this submission. I am more than happy to be contacted in relation to this matter and I'm sure that some of the people directly affected would be happy to provide input as well.