6/8/09

The Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Rural
& Regional Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA   ACT   2600

Dear Senate Inquiry,

I don't believe that changes to Youth Allowance eligibility has helped country students to have greater opportunity to undertake Tertiary study.

You must read the Inquiry int Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education as mentioned in the article from "Benalla Ensign of 5/8/09, pg 10".

If country students don't get the financial assistance to go to Tertiary studies then it retards country Australians from contributing to a better future for Australia and even improving the options in country Australia because these country kids may use their qualifications in a country town.

When a country student cannot achieve what they should have but couldn't because their parents, who earn lower wages because they work in a country town, could not afford to send them away from home to tertiary study, then the rot sets in. Generation after generation of that family just continue to waste skills but only taking on low grade clerical work or customer service. I am living proof of this - Straight A student but just a clerk. I find that amongst those I know, the average wage is $45000 -$55000 gross pa. Look at your statistics and see how much lower a country parents' income is compared to a city person. But sending a child to tertiary study can cost triple that of a city parent.

Have a long hard look at disadvantaged country towns. Read up on Dropping off the Edge - mapping the distribution of disadvantage in Australia by Tony Vinson. Ms Julia Gillard was a part of this. Can she not see how by not helping country Australians to get better qualifications then country people will continue to be disadvantaged.

Please put all of this important research together and make the future brighter for our country citizens and break the cycle unemployment, low income etc.

Yours sincerely,

Benalla Rural City Council/Delatite Community Health Service/Central Access Ltd.

'Dropping Off The Edge'
Outcomes of Community 'Think Tank' Consultations

SUMMARY OF KEY THEMES

Reference Notes for the Agency Forum, at BPACC, on 13 November 2007 at 10am

1. ## Context

This document summarises the key themes that have emerged out of the Community 'Think Tank' Consultations held during October 2007 to address the findings of the Vinson Report - 'Dropping Off the Edge'.

Three 'Think Tank' Consultations were held in Tatong (23 October), Benalla (24 October) and Goorambat (24 October). The Benalla session was fairly well attended (50+) with small attendances in Tatong (7) and Goorambat (8).

At each consultation, the key Vinson findings were briefly explained. These included the key social indicators that contributed to the placement of Benalla in the top 5% of *'socially disadvantaged'* communities in Victoria.

The key indicators were:

Court convictions	Top 5%
Psychiatric admissions	Top 7%
Welfare dependency	Top 9%
Unemployment (> 3 months)	Top 14%
Year 12 incomplete	Top 16%
Early school leavers	Top 25%
Non-pre-school attendance	Top 25%

The lead questions asked of 'Think Tank' participants were:

1.   What is their *personal experience* of these findings?
2.   Are they real?
3.   How does it look from where they live, in their street?
4.   What can we - the Benalla community - **DO** in response to these findings?

The assumptions given at the start of the 'Think Tank' Consultations were as follows:

1.   **Benalla is a great place** with many many positives! There is a danger of becoming too focused on negatives. Despite this, it would be irresponsible for the community to rest on its laurels and ignore the Vinson findings out of hand.

2.   Whatever may or may not be the cause of 'social disadvantage' (now or past), to the extent it exists, it remains wholly and solely a **BENALLA COMMUNITY** problem.

3.   If something proactive is to be done to address the issue, then it has to be done/led **BY THE BENALLA COMMUNITY** (including all its agencies).

4.   Major change comes in small steps over a long time. This process is about identifying the first small steps to achieve long-term change.

This document is to be used to inform a forum of Benalla's community agencies on the community's response to the Vinson Report findings. The key challenge for the Agency

Forum will be to identify tangible actions that will address/alleviate social disadvantage in Benalla.

2.0 EMERGING THEMES FROM 'THINK TANKS' - OUTCOMES

Focus on Prevention rather than Cure   — *'cause' not relevant eg, expressed view that Mott is problem area — not elsewhere (missed 30 yrs ago b - Lcel)*

A common denominator that applied through all feedback was that prevention is better than cure. It was universally agreed that bold and proactive initiatives are required to address entrenched problems that are based on culture and patterns of behaviour.

Another consensus was that the issues/problems identified by Vinson are real!

The following commentary on themes aims to provide a backdrop on what the community is saying and to provoke thought on Benalla's challenges: the outcome we need is to identify what needs to change if Benalla is to move forward.

2.1 'Culture' - Parents as Role Models

The sessions all addressed the issue of 'culture' as a core challenge - this is represented by the standards of behaviour that are widely considered 'normal' or 'accepted' (in many sectors of the community though not all). The comment was made that communities set and enforce their own standards of behaviour, as does each club and organisation. And so the onus remains on us - the Benalla community. The point was made that standards of behaviour are established and reinforced (what is acceptable /not acceptable) through parental role models in the home. This was identified as the most complex of community challenges for Benalla.

In general terms, most participants agreed that something needs to occur to break an entrenched intergenerational cycle that is, in many cases, characterised by negative role models and limiting life expectations. The consensus was that the key to doing this lies in interventions with children, mainly through schools and community/club-based organisations, with agencies providing the facilitation and support.

2.2 'Leadership' - Positive Example-Setting

The key to changing entrenched patterns of behaviour in the community rests in *positive example setting*. It was generally agreed that this needs to occur at all levels of the community - sporting clubs, agencies, service clubs and in the home. Leading by example also needs individuals to have the courage to step in and take action when accepted standards are transgressed or not met... in the home, the club or the street.

Leadership at all levels was identified as crucial to change. Community leadership, schools and in clubs and community organisations as well as by peers of young people. It was in these settings that the most influential examples are set for young people in day-to-day lives.

2.3 Building Pride, Community Self-Image and Esteem

Community pride, image and self-esteem were seen as key elements in changing the way a community sees itself (which in turn, drives how people in it behave). Community projects that get people **actively involved** in their own community were seen as key. These can occur at a City, Street and neighbourhood level. There is a particular need for projects that will create an increased sense of pride in Benalla West neighbourhood (eg a community vegetable garden).

2.4   Geographic - Age Distribution and Cross-Generational 'Bridges

There was much debate about if, and the extent to which, 'social disadvantage' was mostly located in Benalla West. Most people agreed that it was not totally in Benalla West but substantially. Despite the location from where it emerges, it was emphasised that it remains a wider community issue, rather than only a problem for an immediate locality.

Many comments focused on the behaviour of young people as prime contributor to the issues. Following discussion, it was agreed by most that to focus too much on young people was to construe the issue too narrowly. (Domestic violence examples, set by adults at home, in sporting club contexts etc.).

There was discussion about the need to create **cross-generational bridges** to enable younger people to interact with older people and retirees. The potential to set up programs that harness skills of retirees to teach young people in trade and technical skills is a potential direction.

2.5   Inter-Agency Service and Program Coordination

Most of the discussion acknowledged the important role played by community organisations, agencies and service providers (government and non-government). The entrenched nature and complexity of the issues was also acknowledged, as well as the value and extent of existing programs and interventions.

In general, there was feedback that formal agency-delivered programs need to be better publicised and more inter-agency coordination is needed. The need for improved coordination across programs and services was noted.

2.6   Sporting and Recreational Clubs

Sporting clubs were seen as critical in terms of creating opportunities for connectedness. They are also where many behavioural examples and standards are set for younger people. Whilst the extensive positive work by sporting clubs was acknowledged, it was widely suggested that the so-called 'football club culture' was a predominant, very influential, and in some cases, negative role model for young people which, in many cases, revolved around drinking. The ability for young people to participate in sporting activities without exposure to such a drinking culture, was seen as limiting on recreational choices for many parents and young people.

The costs of participation on junior sports and activities were also seen as barriers to wider inclusiveness. Comments were made that most recreational choice was focused on active sports, with a need for more non-sport recreational options to be developed.

—reduced volunteers eg. SES.

2.7   Transport

Access to public transport services was identified as a barrier to community access to services in Benalla. It was identified as a potential barrier to pre-school attendance, as well as for attendance at trade skill learning at nearby regional centres.

3.0   POTENTIAL DIRECTIONS/INITIATIVES EMERGING FROM 'THINK TANKS'

3.1   Education- Schools as the community 'Hub'

Establish schools as 'community hubs' with a legitimate role and matching resources (as opposed to assumed role without resources) spreading wider into family life than academic   education.   This   would   include   pre-post   school engagement/recreation/socialisation   and   opportunities   for   whole-of-family

engagement/life-skills/interaction at all levels. This is supported by the notion that if all families are fully-engaged, their needs can be identified and responded to.

There is danger that schools are seen as the 'panacea' for the community's woes. Schools are already struggling within current resource limits to do what they are expected to do. For schools to be able to play a wider, community hub role (as presented here) would require a complete rethinking of the role they play (school hours/after school hours balance, children/ parents balance) and resourcing.

3.2 Maximise Early-Age 'Connectedness'- Pre-School

Incorporate pre-schools into primary school system per above. Also, find out the barriers to pre-school attendance (conduct research) and respond.

3.3 Early School Leavers

Find out why they leave early ... why don't they go on?

3.4 Employment Opportunities/Career Pathways

Create better local employment opportunities by training people in trade skills. This may be along the lines of a community-based skills centre supported by local businesses, schools and retirees and service clubs (possibly a community enterprise model).

3.5 Setting the Right Example - Mentoring and Leadership Programs

Set up more formal mentoring programs for young people in at-risk areas at various levels. These may involve a mix sports clubs, adults, peers and well-known role models. Use these programs as a way of showing more young people 'what's out there' in terms of life's potential and giving them an opportunity to grow.

3.6 Volunteer Community Organisations/Sports Clubs/Service Clubs

Examine the role that volunteer organisations can play. These organisations are seen collectively as having the most powerful networks into the wider community at all levels. These networks should be leveraged.

Limitations of the volunteer resource were seen as restricting (it's always the same few!!). Despite this, volunteer organisations and clubs, due to their direct connectedness, are the best facilitators, 'channellers', 'legitimisers' and communicators of a range of potential interventions.

3.7 Court Convictions

Discussion about who, for what (major/minor) and how much repeat? Some suggestion about a more community-oriented/linked 'consequence' for offences and the need to liaise with magistrates to identify potential actions.