

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Geelong—Thursday, 24 October 2019

MEMBERS

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Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

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WITNESS

Mrs Lyn Morgan, Executive Officer, Northern Futures.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for being here this morning, Lyn.

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Before you start your 5-minute presentation and we proceed to ask questions after that, I just want to put on the record—it is a good conflict of interest but nevertheless it may be one—that I initially formed Northern Futures along with the federal member back in 2007 when there were some job losses occurring through Ford, the redundancies that were going on. Obviously since 2007 Northern Futures has come a long way and has become a think tank. I congratulate Northern Futures, its entire board and of course you, Lyn, for all the work that you do out there. I am very appreciative of the outcomes that we are getting. It may not be as fast as we would like, but certainly there is some progress. Your organisation is doing a tremendous job and we are really keen as a Committee to hear some of those things that you do in the areas that need it the most. So thank you for being here. If you want to give your presentation and then we will ask questions accordingly.

Mrs MORGAN: Thank you very much for the opportunity. I greatly appreciate it. As you have just heard, Northern Futures is over 10 years old. Over that period I think we have tried a number of different ways to address disadvantage. That is what we really exist to do. There is a lot of disadvantage in Corio and Norlane, and the ultimate answer for disadvantage is employment—as GROW would say, it is sustaining, sustained employment. But for people who have generational experience of the disadvantage of long-term unemployment, all of the mental health effects, the lack of resources and the way it changes your life and then the way it continues to change your life as you bring up children means that you are not ready if an employer knocks on the door and says, 'I've got a job for you'. There is no way that people who have multiple barriers to employment can just do that. Northern Futures has done a lot of experimenting, I think, has been quite courageous over the years and has come up with an integrated model which does help people get employment. We are a tiny organisation—I would not mind fixing that.

Mr ROWSWELL: You should speak to your local member of Parliament about that.

Mrs MORGAN: I will. We have the full-time equivalent of 5.4 people, but to this point in this calendar year we have 86 people in employment placements and we have 70 people who are going through certificate training courses in preparation for jobs. So we are kind of maximising what we can possibly do with the staff that we have.

Our model is very integrated. We partner with almost but not quite everybody in the world. It seems that we have a lot of people who are referring to our organisation, including jobactive and local community organisations—sorry, I should not be mentioning specific things, but a lot of local organisations. We take people, sit them down and have long conversations about their life, their aspirations, where they are and how it is that even though they have got some reason to be looking for work they are just not able to reach the first hurdle or they have fallen out of education. Then we form a plan. As was intimated earlier, sometimes a plan is very long. Sometimes a plan has to entail a bit of community engagement: 'Just go and do a course in a local neighbourhood centre or go and have a meal once a week just to get out of your house and talk to people'. But then it has to come to personal development and really addressing that viewpoint that says, 'There's no place for me in the world. I'm a loser; I'm nothing', and watches the world pass by. We have courses that address that mind shift change.

Then we have courses that we have worked and partnered with The Gordon on. We put together certificate level courses—cert. II, cert. III—informed by employers. So we have gone to local employers and said, 'Where are the gaps? And more importantly, if we train people up in the gaps who have issues, will you open the door and employ them? If we continue to mentor them, have post-placement support, work with you and partner with you, will you employ them?'. For those who have said 'Yes, we will', we have got them together to inform the content of programs, the licences and the skills people need. All the way through our courses we have lots of hands-on kind of opportunities for learning. We visit a lot of work sites and hear from the employer

about what it takes to get a job and to be employed here and what is important to the employer, and then we mentor people through the whole process and arrange for recruitment—basically back doors into employment for people who would otherwise would never have an opportunity.

We are seeing transformation. We are seeing great things happening. What is pretty exciting for me right now is that we have more opportunities than we have resources to meet them. That is not entirely exciting, but part of that is exciting.

So we have employers coming to us saying, 'All right. We want to have the same arrangement with you that you have with this other employer'. We have enough so that we could hopefully start a new civil construction course next year and have employers who would be the speakers at classes, who would have those work site visits and who would employ. We have a local medical facility that is just being completed in the area, and they have approached me with a very mature plan for how they can employ Northern Futures clients because we have worked with them in the past. Now, in a different context, it is them coming and saying, 'Right, this is what we propose and we want you to talk to our trainers so that they can understand what specific needs people have'. There is a lot more opportunity now for us to move forward. It is really pretty exciting. The world looks good from my perspective. Yes, I think an integrated model, well funded, works. It changes people's lives and it creates those transitions so people can move into competing in the workforce independently.

Ms RYAN: Thank you, Lyn. We really appreciate it. It sounds like you are doing some really exciting work. You did mention in your submission that you feel like the current funding allocation is inflexible. How would you change that? What needs to change?

Mrs MORGAN: Northern Futures is in part a work and learning centre. Work and learning centres were developed by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, who have been working in this space for a long time—disadvantage and poverty. I think the model that they came up with was pretty much what was being done in that area in Northern Futures so it was a great match. Then to add to that, or to bolt on to the work and learning centre, the opportunity to work and partner with the TAFE and actually have that added strength of working with local employers, informing TAFE courses, working with the TAFE, making sure that the teachers understood our cohort and understood how they learn and how best to support them, then you have this great cohesive model. I would say a few years ago when I first started, which was a little over two years, the funding was really good because the work and learning centre funding where we partnered with the Brotherhood—and I think it was DHHS that was funding it originally—that was a bit of an alignment of thinking and ideas. It was not so much an employment program as employment being the answer for the disadvantage.

I think that shifted, and I can totally understand why you would shift the work and learning centres into the Jobs Victoria sort of family, but it did bring some other aspects that were not there before. Now that we are negotiating, or the Brotherhood is negotiating, the new contract there seem to be things being put into that that are more about compliance and more aligned with the JVEN tradition and jobactive style of thing. I think that probably, as was mentioned before, that does not really help people transition into being able to get job ready. It just is, as you said, the low-hanging fruit is the only way. I once worked as a manager in a call centre and I know full well that if people wanted to do a good job and meet their KPIs, they had to hang up on two people a day. That is just the KPI thing. If you say this is your target and you will not be happily employed unless we meet this target, then that is what happens. People meet the target if it is low-hanging fruit. Not that people cheat, but if that becomes the target instead of our purpose being to address disadvantage in Corio-Norlane, that is our purpose. That was one side of our funding. The other side was Skilling the Bay, and that also had a change of funder that was providing it.

We had quite a severe reduction in that funding, which was unfortunate, but we still sort of navigated that because of some money that was raised, some grants that were given to us that enabled us to make up that shortfall a bit. We got some money from the Department of Education that helped us look at the nowhere-near-ready-for-skills-training kind of cohort, which we have always tried to help, but we thought, 'Let's do something really specific and see what works. What can we do?'. So if we had funding that allowed us to do that and maybe measured some of that, I think that is really useful. I think this integrated model where we take the time to talk to people, where we specifically guide them through their pathway, have the same mentor all the way through and we know what their aspirations are, what kind of work they are looking for—we cannot give them everything, but we do have engineering and individual support and business, which are quite

different to each other and lead to something broader than it sounds. I kind of think if we are able to have funding which will enable us to grow that, to have that integrated model and grow it, I think that would be awesome, and I too agree with the five to seven years. Seven to 10!

Mr ROWSWELL: Lyn, would it be helpful for you in your role and your organisation's situation to have a clearer sense of the workforce planning piece to understand where the need is and therefore where the opportunity is for people who are seeking employment opportunities and for that to be mapped out in a way that is accessible and clear? Would that help you and your organisation?

Mrs MORGAN: It would in an ideal world, but the interesting piece is we need employers willing to swing the doors open. Some employers will not look at a résumé that has the 3214 postcode on it. So the work of GROW has been incredibly helpful to us because over the years we have developed relationships with a lot of employers. I was one. Previous to this role I was actually working in a job where I had a program for disadvantaged young people—12 a year at the TAC. I was on board. I was wanting to build a program that would kind of be that next step, but not every business has a heart to, not every business has the ability to. But what has happened is those who have opened their doors, many of them have signed up to GROW and they have been invaluable in telling others about what they do in different contexts and in different ways, and even presenting at a GROW network meeting caused a lot of businesses to come and say, 'Tell us about how we can work together'. So knowing where the jobs are is fantastic, and where the gaps are and what we should be training for, especially leading to the future, is one part of the puzzle, but it is the employers who will genuinely open the doors.

We have learned that not everybody who says, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, we'll do it' actually does do it. So, for example, a few years ago we used to have a warehousing course, and that made sense. We had Cotton On here—well, we still have Cotton On. We had a lot of warehousing around, but then warehousing has gone a little bit automated, haven't they? But at the same time The Gordon had some employers or had some companies coming to them saying, 'We need people trained to come into our workplace. We have got engineering, manufacturing workplaces and we need younger people coming through. We have got this need of a workforce', and straightaway The Gordon person thought of Northern Futures. We from that engaged with about eight employers in that field. It was one that approached but because we have learned, we have got about eight employers. We sat them down and said, 'What licences do they need? What training do they need? What is it that you are most concerned about when they come to your place so that they do not kill themselves on your equipment?'.

So we created an engineering course and put it together with The Gordon, and then went back to the people and said, 'This is what we propose—is this what you said?'. Now we have an engineering course where everybody who is ready for employment ends up employed, and those who are not ready we keep working with. It is not to say that everyone who walks through our doors is successful; obviously some fall out, some are not ready, some move away. But anyone who comes we will, to the best of our ability, get them ready for work. And we tell employers, 'Look, we know you're not a charity. We're going to do everything we can to get people up to the standard that you are expecting and need, and then we will work with you to help them get there'. Because there is a lack of resilience and experience. There are numbers of cultural things that still have to happen. But the issues with Corio and Norlane are not that people do not have the abilities or the capacity, it is that life has just been extremely difficult, and we totally know that. We see it every day.

Even when someone has gone through the training and done everything right, that lack of everything we have put in to us by our families and our way of life—we see it. For example, one man was successful in getting the job so he came to Northern Futures on the Friday to sign all the paperwork. A lot of people at that point—well, some—kind of self-sabotage because they do not think they are going to make it. But anyway, this guy came in and he was absolutely stoned. He was absolutely, completely not in a good place. We thought, 'Oh, my goodness. This place is no drugs and alcohol. We have been drumming this into them forever'. But we understood the man was overwhelmed and this was him medicating himself. That was a long weekend thinking, 'What's going to happen on Monday?'. Anyway, he was given six weeks, and he is still there after a year and a few months. That was just an indicator that, 'I can't cope, I don't have coping mechanisms, I don't have learned behaviour'—that kind of stuff. But he is doing well. He got the door open.

Ms ADDISON: That is great. I was about to ask for a happy story.

Mrs MORGAN: I have got lots of happy stories.

Ms ADDISON: We often hear of the very many challenges, but I think this very idea of self-efficacy is particularly challenging for postcodes like the one you have talked about. Because if you have never seen success and you have never had success modelled to you—

Mrs MORGAN: Oh, absolutely.

Ms ADDISON: how do you actually embrace success? Sometimes it is easier to do what that young man did because, 'I'm too scared that I might be successful'.

Mrs MORGAN: Yes, 'I just don't know how to do that'. I will just quickly tell you, we had one young man who had been homeless from age 15 and was trying to finish school, but it is pretty hard when you do not know where you are going to sleep that night so he fell out of school. He came through jobactive—no, Transition to Work, perhaps—but he came to us to do our business course. He thought, 'Oh, this is just going to be another course on the résumé because that's how life is; you do courses, they go on your résumé —whackadoo'. Those were his words. That was what he thought. But he did not realise that ours is an integrated model. We do not do courses that do not lead somewhere. He was in our business basics because he needed to do something, and it just happened to be that this fabulous IT organisation in the north of Geelong decided they might like to partner with Northern Futures. They called me to a meeting and said, 'Can we talk to you?'. I thought they were going to pitch—because we had become a not for profit—why we should buy stuff off them that we cannot afford. But, no, they were actually saying, 'We want to partner with you. Do you need any IT?'. Like, serious? So they provided us with equipment, which was sensational. But also then they said, 'Come and bring your class to see our worksite and we'll partner with you'.

So what happened was the class went to see the worksite, and this young man asked a few questions—because he was really interested in IT—and they had a bit of a conversation. That happens a lot. Then afterwards the IT people said, 'Well, we can offer a traineeship in IT if anybody is actually interested'. I said, 'I think you might find someone who is actually interested'. So this young man got the traineeship and he has done a second traineeship, and now he has got ongoing employment. But beyond that, what has happened—and happens a lot—is the human thing where you have become part of a team. Now, most of us when we become part of a team, they get to know that we like the opera or we go to the footy or that kind of stuff. They got to know that he had been homeless. He still had unstable housing. He was living with people. He was kind of stuck in his bedroom and it was not safe to go out but at least he had a bed kind of situation. He does not know that they have done this, but they have subsidised a flat. And so for the first time in his life he has stable housing because people care. I think that is the missing factor when we use funding and models that are just about employment. What I want to see is Geelong, which is really thriving and going well as a community, solving our own problems. Let us be a community, because given the opportunity people really want to be a part of the answer. So anyway, that is a good news story.

Ms ADDISON: What a great story; that's lovely.

Mrs MORGAN: This is one of a lot.

The CHAIR: Lyn, you know this, but the north is the jobs hub of Geelong. You have got Avalon, you have got the Geelong Ring Road employment precinct, you have got ports. There is some work going on at the Ford site. There is Shell for example, or Viva I should say. So there are a number of large employers in the area, and ironically it is the area that has got the most unemployment in terms of the rest of Geelong. I know we have spoken about this with employers particularly. They are not unwilling to take on people from 3214, it is just that they are not job ready.

Mrs MORGAN: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: I know that you have spoken about that; we have spoken about that. Can you give some examples of what you do as an organisation to get people job ready? What is the feedback from employers in relation to that?

Mrs MORGAN: Sure. It is different working with people than it is with machines. I come from Norlane. I dropped out of school when I was 15. I had no idea why I was there. It was not what it is now back in the day, because I am slightly older than 29.

Ms RYAN: You don't look a day over 30.

Mrs MORGAN: I kind of look good, I think. I have a little bit of lived experience. There was never a problem with unemployment back in the day—you could just walk into a job. But what I had was trouble fitting in; you know, fitting in, understanding the workplace, not being inappropriate. My normal at home was really not normal at work, which is what helped me when I was at the TAC with a program of people who were in the same boat. I see it again and again, so I think that the culture of living in survival has different priorities to the culture where you are not living in survival. You can look to the future and you can save for the future. You can educate for the future, you can get a job that will take you to where you want, but when you are in survival it is today. We are just thinking about today, and that is why in this situation if you get money, you spend it, because tomorrow is probably going to be rubbish and you have just got to entertain yourself while you can.

And so the not being job ready is about not being a cultural fit and not having the resilience and thinking differently. You and I might make sure we have got a bit of money so that if the car breaks down, we can get a mechanic, but if you are in survival, there is no money for a mechanic. So you have got to have relationships with people because they are good at cars, but then you have got to pay them back, which might mean that you cannot go to work that day—that kind of thinking. So that change of thought, especially for people who have really had horrible things in their lives and—

The CHAIR: And it is generational, too, isn't it?

Mrs MORGAN: Absolutely. The amount of people who come to us where dad is in jail and mum is on drugs, we are living with grandma, and it has all disintegrated—in all the different iterations of that, with crime and drugs and all that sort of stuff, it is really just survival. It is just trying to survive. We have found people coming off drugs, and certainly we have taken people who have been on corrections orders and in jail and stuff, and found their lives changed by having a job. To prepare for a job is to learn to believe in yourself a little bit and have a bit of self-belief and a bit of confidence. Sometimes it can be—

The CHAIR: But how do you teach that, though? How do you get them to that position? What are you doing through Northern Futures?

Mrs MORGAN: Okay, so we have one sort of area which we call Now and Then, because 'now' and 'then' might be a bit different, hopefully. We take people where they are and case-manage them, and we might help them to do some volunteering with local community organisations or engage with neighbourhood houses and that kind of thing, just to get out of the house. We also have a course called Getting Ahead, which is about that mindset change about looking at the effects of poverty and of survival mode and how it affects how we think about ourselves and our future and our place in the world, and then looking more broadly at the things that impinge on us. It is kind of interrogating your own thoughts and your own beliefs about yourself and changing that mindset. Then we continue to have those one-on-one case management mentoring sessions with people, and depending on their aspirations, we help them to move into training. The skills training that we have still has a lot of personal development in there, a lot of hands-on kind of learning, but there is still that one-on-one case management mentoring.

If necessary, we will bring in specialist organisations who will help with the mental health, with the anxiety, with the money problem, with the gambling, with the drug and alcohol—whatever it might be—the family breakdown. But we try to build the inside, a bit of resilience, while we are doing the skills training. We also get some life coaching for some people because that is really necessary. So it is very individual, but it is about looking at: what are you thinking, in your head, and how did you come to that and how can we help you interrogate that thought and help you realise that actually you can do things and you are worth something and there is a place for you?

No-one is more surprised than our clients when they get a job—to see someone literally fall off their chair because you tell them, ‘You have got a job’. And it is not an easy ride, to go through Northern Futures. You have to show up, you have to come in, you have to examine yourself. You have to start thinking about things. You have to come to the courses and you have to earn a certificate II or a certificate III. So it is not an easy ride, but it will develop you and bring you to a place where we have partners who will open their doors. We will stay with you. It is a long tail to get people prepared. You cannot just take them to the door and say, ‘Well, we’ve done our bit’, because there are some invisible things that you just do not know.

The CHAIR: And what is the reaction of the employers in relation to you getting that cohort of people ready for a job?

Mrs MORGAN: We have amazing partnerships with employers. Obviously some have higher expectations and are a little less flexible, but most are so happy with the people that we get, because we have skill-trained them, not just given them interview skills and résumés. In that time, we have tested them out and we have made sure that they do arrive on time, they do come every day, and we have addressed things that we have seen as they have come up.

We have had at least four or five months to get to know this person and understand who they are and what they are capable of, and we have a relationship with employers so we are careful to match that as well as we can. Some employers, we have said to them, ‘Look, in this situation we could help you maybe to supplement an internship or help you in some other way’, and many have gone, ‘No, no. We don’t need any of that. We are in this. We are part of this community and we are part of the answer to this problem’. So that is that big community piece.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you. Anything further you wanted to add? Can I just quickly ask: in terms of the success stories and how many people have gone through Northern Futures, say, in the last two years, for example, what are the success rates and how do you monitor that success?

Mrs MORGAN: Well, we capture everything, so we capture how many people went through courses, how many started, how many went through and from those courses who got jobs—all of that sort of stuff. We capture every time we reach a milestone. So we have KPIs obviously with the funding that we get through Jobs Victoria. I am not exactly a detail person, so I do not have in my head those figures, but—

The CHAIR: Can you provide that information at a later time?

Mrs MORGAN: I certainly can, yes.

Mr ROWSWELL: It has been provided for the last 12 months in your submission.

Mrs MORGAN: That was just the high-level sort of thing.

The CHAIR: That was high level, though. We might put some meat on the bone in terms of that.

Mrs MORGAN: Yes, absolutely. I can do that. You can kind of see from those figures how much work it takes. But if it does not take that much work, then you are not really going to the people who need you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much.

Ms ADDISON: Thank you so much, Lyn. Congratulations on all the amazing work you are doing.

Mrs MORGAN: Thank you. The only thing I would leave you with is that our funding is about to run out, and I would like for my life not to be taken up with running around looking for money and a bit more to build on this—

The CHAIR: I think you are talking to your local member about that.

Mrs MORGAN: Yes.

The CHAIR: We can work our way through it. That is fine.

Ms RYAN: When does that lapse?

Mrs MORGAN: At the end of June is when one of the funding sources will finish.

Ms RYAN: End of next June?

Mrs MORGAN: June of next year, yes. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Lyn.

Witness withdrew.