

Friday, November 06, 1998

Impact of Competition Policy Reforms Inquiry
Productivity Commission
PO Box 80
Belconnen ACT 2616

Attention Jill Irvine

Dear Madam,

I would like to take the opportunity to outline several changes that have become evident in our small rural community in the last few years. The changes will be able to be attributed to several factors such as government tendering, reduced government funding to the agencies or the fact that the area has been affected by a substantial drought and low commodity prices.

The area namely the former Omeo shire now part of the East Gippsland shire an area of 1/10th the state of Victoria has four main communities namely Ensay, Swifts Creek, Omeo and Benambra. The whole of this area is currently declared drought affected by the Department of Primary Industries & Energy's 'exceptional circumstances' criteria. Then in June of this year part of the area received substantial damage through flood. Both the state and local government quickly put into place crisis support for affected residents.

There are several sectors of the community that I feel confident in raising concerns about because of my involvement with various committees of management and employment. The areas are youth and some sections of welfare. Through participation in these committees it has become evident that the following is happening to most funded agencies that have a presence either full time or as the 'visiting' agency. The services have either become hard to find, or the contact person changes and you have difficulty contacting the appropriate person to make an appointment for the services next visit. The next step appears to be that a different agency becomes the successful tendered and you have to visit Bairnsdale to access their services.

Bairnsdale is our closest major centre with a population of 10,000 meaning that they also have many services which are also 'visiting'. The distance from Omeo to Bairnsdale is nearly two hours car travel for most residents of this area. The area has one commercial bus service operating Monday to Friday (but not public holidays) leaving Omeo 8.00 a.m. arriving in Bairnsdale at 10.30 a.m. The bus then leaves Bairnsdale at 1.30 p.m. and arrives in Omeo at approximately 4.15 p.m. The reason for including this information is to highlight the difficulty many residents face in endeavoring to access services available at limited times.

One service I would like to discuss is case management for long term unemployed. An agency who had a part-time permanent presence in the area were successful in receiving funding to work with this target group.

The service was very successful in placing people in employment in the area and promoting a variety of options available to both the employers and the unemployed. The next round of funding was subject to competitive tendering and another agency was successful they are responsible for this area but to date (fifteen months later) no worker has visited the area or advertised their service to the residents.

The residents are able to post in their claim forms and do not have to prove they are actively seeking employment because they are outside the two-hour radius from their closest Centrelink. The area is also subject to high rates of unemployment especially in the area of youth and the likelihood of finding employment is fairly remote. We are likely to become one of the areas no agency wishes to service. I have established that the agency has commenced visiting the area one-day per month to see clients. The agency is also making appointments for case managed clients (without licences) to travel to Bairnsdale for interviews at times that are not practical to coincide with public transport

The East Gippsland Access Project (EGAP) with submission based funding from the Office Youth Affairs provided one full time worker in Bairnsdale for co-ordination, administration and servicing the RYC plus five workers one day per week in the areas of Swifts Creek, Buchan, Mallacoota, Orbost and Bairnsdale co-located with East Gippsland Institute of TAFE Outreach co-ordinators. EGAP had provided youth information, referral, advocacy and support with funding from various agencies and pilot projects for the last ten years. Rural youth transition assistance was one area EGAP had focused resources on as the majority of the young people in the area relocate to larger urban/metro areas for further study or employment.

EGAP were not successful with its submission in July 1997 resulting in no funding for generalist youth specific services outside school being available to the young people East of Lakes Entrance. The EGAP submission for 1998 was also unsuccessful. This is at a time when the number of young people in Gippsland completing year twelve is the lowest in the state and at the same time the number of young people register as looking for work is the highest in the state. The agency funded to assist young people deal with transition issues does not have a worker in East Gippsland.

Transition is one problem that all the young people in this area face. It is a five-hour drive from Omeo to the centre of Melbourne or two buses and trains ride to use public transport. In the last ten years more than 90% of the young people have left the area to pursue possible options. The pressure placed on the families who try to plan for their young person's further study options are often great, as some of the parents have never lived in Melbourne or even rented a house. They are unsure where to start gathering information for them to make an informed decision. The unfortunate result is that the young people are choosing to opt for trying to pursue further study and work options in Bairnsdale where they know what to do.

I have a son undertaking his final year of an Arts degree at Melbourne University, living in a shared rental property.

He is in receipt of Austudy support, which he supplements with part-time employment. He has experienced times of concern and worry just being away from his support networks and looking for accommodation.

The concern is juggling what he can afford to pay in weekly payments and bond and the agent/landlords requirements for references etc. My son was lucky in that he had participated in activities prior to leaving the area to prepare him, such as the Money & Life camp provided by the combined Credit Unions. He also spent several days in Melbourne at Latrobe University participating in a transition camp. Activities included a 'treasure hunt' in the city visiting government agencies and finding out what services they provided and then, a workshop with Family Planning Victoria on 'safe sex'. These activities assist to prepare young people and their families for the transition.

I am aware that families all experience difficulty when their children leave home but feel the problem is now compounded by the lack of assistance or support currently being given. One of the biggest problems the residents of small rural communities face is knowing to whom they should go for assistance or support. The amalgamation of the local shire councils is but one of the agencies that used to provide services that have now been removed. The community is endeavoring to deal with many issues at the same time and must prioritize them into what they can deal with effectively. People are being forced to make decisions that impact on their families survival and the collective good of the community.

Another area of concern is the visiting specialist for the kindergarten who would attend once or twice a year to assess the children prior to them commencing school. This year the teacher has stated to several mothers that the service is no longer available at the kindergarten. There are now several people with private practices in Bairnsdale who could possibly assess the children, who have been identified by the parent or the teacher. The problem is that neither the teacher nor the parents really know which agency to contact to discuss the situation.

These are my immediate concerns as a member of one of the many rural communities dealing with low commodity prices, drought and flood, withdrawal of services, the government has just announced they will buy unviable farms. There seems to be little hope and anticipation forecast for the future of rural communities. Hopefully it will be better.

I hope my comments are what you required. I obtained the information from some else and did not get all the information and because of the lateness did not try to get it sent to me and my modem is not working at present.

Yours sincerely,



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