

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Use of School Buses in Rural and Regional Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 25 August 2021

MEMBERS

Mr Enver Erdogan—Chair

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Mark Gepp

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

Mr Lee Tarlamis

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Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr David Davis

Mr David Limbrick

Ms Wendy Lovell

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

Ms Harriet Shing

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

Ms Sheena Watt

WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Dr Michele Lonsdale, Deputy Chief Executive Officer and Director of Social Policy, Research and Advocacy, and

Ms Georgette Antonas, Manager, Policy, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.

The CHAIR: The Economy and Infrastructure Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into the Use of School Buses in Rural and Regional Victoria continues. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that any background noise is minimised.

I wish to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. I wish to welcome any members of the public that are watching via the live broadcast.

My name is Enver Erdogan, and I am the Chair of the committee. I would like to introduce my fellow committee members—Mr Lee Tarlamis, Mr Mark Gepp, Mr Tim Quilty and Mr Rod Barton—that are present here today.

To witnesses giving evidence: 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 Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore any information you provide during the hearing is protected by law; however, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Ultimately transcripts will be made public and put on the committee's website.

We welcome any opening comments, but I ask that they be kept to a maximum of 15 minutes to allow plenty of time for questions and discussions. Could you please start by stating your name for Hansard and then begin your presentation. Over to you.

Dr LONSDALE: Michele Lonsdale, Deputy CEO and Director of Social Policy, Research and Advocacy at the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.

Ms ANTONAS: Georgette Antonas. I am Manager of Policy at the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, and I will be presenting our opening address.

First of all, thank you for the opportunity to present at today's hearing. Firstly, I would also like to take the opportunity to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which our Parliament is held and to pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging and any Aboriginal people who may be listening to today's proceedings.

The centre for excellence is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria. Our members work with families across the continuum of family services—from early intervention right through to out-of-home care. Many of our member agencies are located and work with children and families in rural and regional Victoria. Our interest in the topic of expanding school bus use is based on our commitment as a peak body for change for vulnerable children and families in Victoria to have safe access to public transport.

The centre's brief written response to the inquiry has already been submitted. It focused on the following: firstly, the main transport disadvantages and challenges experienced by young people in regional areas; and secondly, how mainstream school buses in regional areas can be made safer for children and young people. The centre consulted with staff and members in regional areas from Geelong, Ballarat, Mildura and Colac in preparing our submission. Our members work directly with children, parents, carers and families experiencing disadvantage and hardship in rural and regional areas.

The provision of reliable and safe transport options for young people within regional Victoria is an issue that needs to be seriously considered and addressed, as it can limit engagement with services, education and employment. This is compounded for families who may not have access to a vehicle. For many children and young people, the only way to attend school is for a parent to drive them. If the parent loses access to a vehicle,

this can then limit the child's ability to attend school. Many children in regional Victoria rely on the school bus to attend school; however, the bus timetable can limit the ability of students to attend after-school activities, socialise with friends or seek after-school employment. For older teenagers and young people, a lack of transport options means that their access to employment opportunities and further education like TAFE and university is limited.

Our submission highlights the disadvantages faced by children, young people and their families in more detail. Overall, our members support increasing public transport options in rural and regional Victoria by expanding the school bus program to members of the general public. However, this measure alone will not fix the transport disadvantages that are impacting on families living in rural and regional Victoria.

We would like to take this opportunity to make some further recommendations, as follows: involve community members, including children and young people and families, in mapping transport needs and challenges and co-designing a local network that is responsive to local requirements; better link existing transport routes to TAFE, universities, shopping centres, community health centres and public libraries et cetera; strengthen transport linkages between towns; schedule public transport timetables that take into account school and university hours, including extracurricular activities as well as irregular employment hours for industries like hospitality, which employ more young people; make rural and regional transport free for full-time students; make school buses available in downtimes, before and after school hours, during the day, in the evening and on the weekends; consult with local communities, including children and young people, about the preferred use for these buses during this period; the school bus program should not be exempt from the school disability standards, and school buses should be accessible for all children; consider expanding existing bus routes to children attending three- and four-year-old kindergarten and their parents or carers and young people who have left school early and are attending TAFE or who have an apprenticeship; carefully consider the impact of expanding existing school bus routes to the public to make sure that children and young people using the service are not disadvantaged—for example, if travel time is increased as a result of changes; conduct a comprehensive child safe audit before expanding the school bus route to members of the general public. This audit should include consideration of the following: a child safe risk assessment. This should include an assessment of risk posed in the physical environment—for example, sitting on the bus, bus stops and at transit locations; service users; potential online risks; staff training requirements and the understanding of child safe policies and procedures; supervision requirements; child safe training requirements for school bus staff; management plans for when or if adults display inappropriate behaviours; consideration of the type of bus, seating arrangements, the use of seatbelts and booster seats; reporting policies and procedures and how they will be communicated to staff, volunteers, children and their families; and a careful consideration of grooming and other risks to children and young people.

The provision of reliable and safe transport options for young people in regional Victoria is an important issue for children, young people and families. The lack of convenient and affordable transport options poses real barriers to child and youth participation. The consideration of expanding the use of school buses merits further consideration.

Thank you for the opportunity for us to give evidence today, and we welcome any questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Georgette, for that comprehensive overview of your position relating to the inquiry references. I might start off by going to Mr Barton to ask the first question, then we can go to Mr Gepp and then go around to committee members. Each committee member can maybe spend 5 to 6 minutes asking a number of questions. Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Dr Lonsdale and Georgette. It is just interesting. You made some comments about kids not being able—perhaps, because of the school bus routes, they cannot do netball practice or they cannot go to footy practice. I also come from the commercial side of operating commercial passenger vehicles. It is really hard to put a figure around it. How would you measure that? How would you measure that sort of demand? Do you have any idea? Do you have a best guesstimate? Is it 5 per cent of kids would like to be doing that or 10 per cent of kids? I do not know. How could we think about that?

Ms ANTONAS: Look, I do not have a figure, but it was definitely a theme when we spoke with our members that they raised. I think as well if you refer to the YACVic submission that has been submitted to this inquiry, they actually surveyed some of the young people who are their members, and that gave a sense of some

numbers of children and young people that this impacts on. But it definitely was a theme that our members raised in our consultations, particularly after-school activities for children.

Mr BARTON: Yes. Can I have another question now, Chair, or would you like me to come back?

The CHAIR: Please proceed.

Mr BARTON: Thank you. An ongoing theme is there is a genuine concern about safety on the buses, but I can just suggest some things to you on the safety now. We have heard today that New South Wales and Queensland have been operating this—having adults on school buses—and they have been for a number of years. I do not think there has been any overwhelming evidence given—certainly not to us—that there is a problem yet. But if we considered opening them up so that adults can only sit in the front, or perhaps there could be a volunteer that could be on the bus from one of the schools on the school runs supervising the kids, we think that would help—well, I think it would help—in terms of one of the issues.

We know that we have got big kids—16, 17—bullying the seven- or eight-year-olds, and we know that is an issue. And if we put security cameras—we know now that there are no security cameras on school buses. On public transport buses there is, but we have got nothing on school buses, which I find a little surprising. If we deal with those issues, do you think we could satisfy the community's concerns?

Ms ANTONAS: Look, I think the first step really has to be conducting a thorough child safe audit. As part of that process you would need to identify all of the potential risks and do that in a really systematic way. There are a number of frameworks for doing that, thinking particularly around situational risk prevention—so looking at what is happening on the ground, in community, and in particular looking at each individual bus route. I think it really has to go down to that sort of local level. So you are looking at: what is the staffing profile? What is the profile of the children and families who are using the bus service? Do they have particular vulnerabilities that might make them more susceptible to, for example, grooming risks? What are the training requirements that staff need? What are some of the physical measures that you could put in place to mitigate against these risks? For example you mentioned seating children and young people separately or having a trained volunteer, for example, to supervise. What additional training requirements might be required? How would the bus driver be able to supervise as well as manage the driving and do their job in driving the bus?

It is part of that risk analysis and really thinking through a risk matrix, mapping out what are lower risks and what are the more significant risks that might potentially take place and what are the strategies that you could put in place to mitigate against them? So it could be really making sure that staff understand reporting requirements, they understand what red flags to look out for and have a thorough understanding of child safety risks—signs of abuse, for example. Also think about what is the information that you need to provide to parents, carers and young people themselves for them to be informed but not alarmed, I would say, and also for them to know where they can go if they have concerns. So the reporting requirements will be really important. In Victoria we have the child safe standards, which give us a really good framework and structure for how to manage child safe risk. I would really recommend looking closely at the requirements under the standards as part of that risk analysis. So having robust child safe policies, procedures, having robust codes of conduct and even considering whether that is a requirement not only for the adult staff but also for older young people who might be using the bus service—what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, what are the consequences if inappropriate behaviour is engaged in during the use of the bus—and most importantly having really strong and robust reporting requirements. That is really important so that everyone who uses the service knows who they can speak to if they have a concern.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Georgette. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that, Georgette. Mr Gepp.

Mr GEPP: Thank you. Thanks, Michele, and thanks, Georgette, for being with us today. I am interested in this notion, which is ostensibly what the inquiry is looking at: can you integrate or conflate a public transport system with a school bus environment, particularly in regional Victoria, where the reason you have your standalone school bus system of course is because of the geography, the distance that our kids have to travel and making sure that they can get there? For many people in regional and rural Victoria, their jobs start on the land at daybreak, and they are right into the swing of things. Cows do not stop needing to be milked in order to drive a child to school—so all of those sorts of things. But we also know that the school system, particularly in

terms of start and finishing times, is pretty rigid, whereas we are moving to a more on-demand system for our public transport environment. I am just wondering how you see those two different environments integrating if we were to combine the school bus system with that public transport system?

Dr LONSDALE: Maybe I could give an example of that. It is not only regional and rural areas as well; it is also the outskirts of Melbourne. For example, we are 5 kilometres from a train station, and for a child to catch the school bus it is a 2-kilometre walk. The local council did a survey a couple of years ago about what community needs were in terms of public transport and were people interested in a bus service out of hours. Now, the school bus would come once a day to pick up kids from the general store and then drop them off once a day. Now, for that school bus, if the council had integrated with the bus company, there might have been a more integrated approach because the input into that survey could have informed what that bus company might have been able to do for local community citizens.

Mr GEPP: I take that point. In my electorate and Mr Quilty's electorate of Northern Victoria, at 100 000 square kilometres, if you take the Mallee, for example, many of the kids that are on the school buses live 50 kilometres from school or so. There is no other form of transport available. So I am just wondering: in that environment, I can see in the peri-urban areas of Melbourne where this might be able to be extended or you can integrate this with other services, but out where we are in some parts of our electorate there is only one bus available. And because the kids need to get from point A to the start of school and that start-of-school time is not flexible—it starts at 9 o'clock—just how might we integrate those concepts of 'on demand', which we are moving to in a more peri-urban/urban environment, as opposed to the strict timetable, if you like, the rigidity of the timetable?

Ms ANTONAS: I think part of the answer might actually be speaking with young people. They might have some really good solutions that they can think of that really meet or might take into account their needs but also the needs of the adults around them, because they live in the community as well and they see what is happening. So it might be that they might say, 'Okay, we'd be happy to start school a little bit earlier' or 'We'd actually prefer the bus to come a little bit later so that we can engage in some after-school activities'. Or they might say, 'Our commute, our bus trip, is long enough. We actually don't really think it would be good to have a longer bus route to go to other stops to pick up other people'. I think it would be really important to actually engage with children and young people and to see what they need from the service and to see what solutions they could come up with.

Mr GEPP: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that, Mr Gepp. I might pass on to Mr Quilty, then Mr Tarlamis.

Mr QUILTY: Thanks. You talked in your submission about a lack of flexibility, especially when kids' circumstances change during the year, and you thought that kids in care were being moved around and perhaps losing access. One of the things we discussed earlier today was adding capacity to the buses—so rather than limiting the service to exactly the number of students, actually making the buses 20 per cent or 50 per cent larger, where possible, than the enrolments, which would provide capacity for people to join but also would provide much more flexibility for people to change during the year. Can you comment on that and the problems faced there?

Ms ANTONAS: That was a comment that came up through our consultations with a member based in Mildura who highlighted the challenges facing children who are in out-of-home care and who may have to move placement during the year. We know that children in out-of-home care already have much higher rates of school disengagement compared to other children, so we really need to think about making it easier for them to attend school, and if it is easier for them to access the school bus route and that in turn makes it easier for them to attend school, then that is something that we should consider. So whether that is having extra capacity on school buses and they do not then need to apply to have a spot, so that there is a bit more flexibility around that, that could be a solution.

Another issue that our members raised, particularly in the Mildura area, was the lack of awareness of timetables and the school bus scheduling because of placement moves, so that is something that we could perhaps consider a bit more: how to inform young people about the services that are available.

Mr QUILTY: So how difficult is it to change during the year, to get onto a bus route, if they are things that have been set at the start of the year? Are they fixed for the whole year, or do they do it every term?

Ms ANTONAS: I do not know the answer to that question. That concern came up in a consultation as something that they have been seeing on the ground. But normally the out-of-home care provider would be in discussion with the school and other service providers, as part of the transition, to make those arrangements.

Mr QUILTY: You have called for placing a safe adult person on a bus if it is opened up to the public. That is going to significantly raise the cost of providing the services. We have heard that the majority of the cost of providing a bus service is for the driver and the fuel, so if you are adding another person in, you are looking at a significant cost. Do you think that can be afforded or supported?

Ms ANTONAS: Look, there could be other options. You could think about training a volunteer parent, for example. So it does not necessarily need to involve costs. One of the themes that came through very strongly in our consultations was the high cost of accessing public transport in rural and regional Victoria, so I would not want to impose any measure that would increase costs for families, as that already is a significant financial concern for many families.

Mr QUILTY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Tarlamis.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Michele and Georgette. A lot of the questions I had have already been asked, but I was interested in your submission. You talked about how utilising school buses previously had been a successful option, and you mentioned Gippsland. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about where the buses had been used during the day. They utilised community routes to assist community members with transport options. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Ms ANTONAS: Look, that was something that was raised in consultation in a positive way. But further than what was raised in the consultation, I cannot provide further information at this stage. It is something we could give more information on to the inquiry, if you would like. But that was raised in consultation as a positive initiative.

Mr TARLAMIS: Yes. Okay. I do not have any further questions, Chair, at this point.

The CHAIR: I think many of the questions I had have been asked and answered. Nonetheless I will make the point that we had representatives from Infrastructure Victoria as earlier witnesses to the hearing today, and they made the point that they could not see necessarily a statistical link between, I guess, child safe overcomes and the public's use of transport. They did put the disclaimer that they are not experts in the field, by the way, so I will put that point. Have you looked at other jurisdictions and how they operate and compared it to our Victorian model of the school bus program?

Ms ANTONAS: Do you mean in terms of child safety?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Ms ANTONAS: Not specifically. I mean, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, as you are aware, conducted extensive investigations. Public transport, as far as I am aware from my reading, did not come up as a high-risk institution. There was a report looking at the experiences of children with a disability using transport or school buses, and there were some concerns raised in that context. And there were some cases that were before the royal commission actually in relation to school buses rather than public transport. There was a disability school with a school bus, and there were some significant incidents that happened in relation to that case. As far as I am aware, public transport is not a high-risk environment in terms of child safety.

In metropolitan areas children and young people are on public transport with adults all the time. I think the difference in this context is the opportunity to see the same person or the same people every day or on a regular basis because they are catching the same bus at the same time, and that would be the opportunity to develop more of a relationship that could then lead to inappropriate behaviour or potential grooming. So I think it is that

element that is the additional risk when you are thinking about a school bus route as opposed to public transport more broadly.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Georgette, especially for that case example. Did you want to add to that, Dr Lonsdale?

Dr LONSDALE: I was just going to say a lot of our work, even though there might not be a lot of evidence about risk, is about prevention, and so everything that we have suggested in our submission and that Mr Barton suggested as well is all about creating a safe space right from the outset.

Ms ANTONAS: And I think when you are thinking about child safety—and this again was a big theme coming actually from the recommendations of the royal commission—the intention of creating child safe policies, procedures and structures is not to stop children and young people from participating. We know that it is really important for children and young people to participate in education. It is a fundamental right. It is in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that they access education. That they also have access to leisure activities as well is enshrined in the convention. So it is really thinking about how we create an environment where we have considered risk and we have got policies and procedures in place to mitigate against that risk, keeping in mind the rights of children to fully participate in education, in leisure and in other activities. So it is really, as Michele said, thinking about how we create that child safe environment right from the start where it is really clear that there is a culture of child safety, that it is really transparent and that, as I said before, people, children and families know where they can raise concerns and that they know that they will be listened to. I think that is really important.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that. I might go around to committee members to ask additional questions, as we have some time remaining. Mr Gepp and then Mr Barton.

Mr GEPP: Thanks. I just wanted to tease that issue out a little bit further in terms of what we hear, and what we have heard is around child safety. There are comparisons that are often drawn between the public transport system and the school bus system. I know, as a regional MP, that with the public transport system in Melbourne when the kids leave school there are a lot of them and there are a lot of other people around, but of course in a regional school bus environment that is not the case, and these kids can live—you know. So what we hear is concern being expressed by parents, rightly or wrongly, about introducing that level of risk—that is, members of the public—into that environment and whether that is an acceptable risk; in the environment of a regional bus or the regional school bus system can you mitigate that risk in that sort of environment? I am just wondering whether you got any feedback through your consultations about that particular aspect and what we could do. I note that you talked about things such as perhaps giving the bus drivers more detail of the passengers. That might not be [Zoom dropout] easily, you know, because you are effectively mixing and matching those public transport, regional bus and school bus systems. Did you receive any feedback about that?

Ms ANTONAS: Look, in our consultations I think there was definitely an appreciation of potential child safety risks and concern from parents, but there was also an acknowledgement or a consideration of the barriers facing people in rural and regional areas in accessing transport. It is a balancing proposition, really. I think what the starting point really needs to be, as I mentioned before, is to undertake a thorough child safety audit and risk assessment, and that will allow local communities to really flesh out what the potential child safety risks are and what are some measures that can be implemented to mitigate against those risks. I think involving local communities in those discussions would be really helpful because the parents are the ones who are going to have the concerns—and also young people, because for a lot of young people actually being on the school bus is a safe place for them where they meet their friends. It is part of their social activity, and that is really important to them. In fact the new child safe standards emphasise the importance of friendship to children, so that is something that we need to consider as well when we are thinking about changes to services and systems.

I think it really needs to be at a local level when you are thinking about the balancing objectives and what the priorities are and what the risks could be and how you can mitigate against those risks. I do not really have a much more definitive answer to that. I think it really has to be at the local level when you really interrogate quite closely, and that really goes to even looking at the bus stops. You know, where is the bus going to stop? Is it secluded? What is the level of visibility? How many other adults would be potentially waiting at that bus stop, and for how long? What happens if the bus is delayed or if it does not come? All of those types of considerations need to be thought of, I think, at that local level. In terms of policies and procedures, you know,

there could be overarching ones that apply across a range of areas or in a regional area or a particular council area, but I think when you are thinking about risk at that level you need to really consider it at a local community level.

Mr GEPP: Yes. Thanks. Because I can see absolutely at the design level, if you like, of the service how it is so important to talk to the kids and their parents about how the system is designed. From a regulatory perspective, it is different; you know, what you cannot have is a model here and a different model over there and different rules. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. In having a look at all this, did you have a look at how many kids actually use the public transport system in regional and rural Victoria? Do you have any idea how many kids are doing that now?

Ms ANTONAS: No, that is a good question. No, I do not have the figure on that.

Mr BARTON: Yes. It is just that we had Professor Stanley from Melbourne University at our last hearing, who has done a bit of work in this area of transport, and her view was that the risk is no greater than the public transport. So that was just an interesting comparison. We have heard that previously as well. No, I was just curious about what proportion of kids are already using public transport. That is all, so thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that question, Mr Barton. It might be something that we ask Infrastructure or the Department of Transport; maybe they might have some better data in that space.

On that note, if no other committee members have questions, we might conclude the presentation from the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. On that note I want to thank Dr Lonsdale and Georgette for your submission and your presentation today. It has been very informative and will assist the committee in its work and deliberations moving forward. So on behalf of the committee I wish to say thank you to both of you.

Ms ANTONAS: Thank you for the opportunity.

Dr LONSDALE: Thank you very much. Bye.

The CHAIR: It has been a pleasure to have you. Thank you. The committee will now take a short 5-minute break before our next witnesses.

Witnesses withdrew.