

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users

Melbourne—Tuesday 22 August 2023

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Anthony Cianflone

Wayne Farnham

John Mullahy

Dylan Wight

Jess Wilson

WITNESSES

Michelle McLaughlin, Chief Executive Officer, and

Bruce Morris, Board member, Little Blue Dinosaur Foundation.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into the impacts of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament website.

While all evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts and other documents provided to the Committee during the hearing will be published on the Committee's website. I remind Members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise interference.

Michelle and Bruce, thank you so much for joining us. I am Alison Marchant, the Member for Bellarine and the Chair. I will just introduce the other Members. We have got Kim O'Keefe, Deputy Chair and Member for Shepparton; Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale; Dylan Wight, Member for Tarneit; Wayne Farnham, Member for Narracan; Jess Wilson, Member for Kew; and John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

If you would like to make an opening statement or talk to your submission, or if there is anything extra you would like to add today, we will give you those few minutes. Then we will go into some questions, and I will nominate some of the Committee members to ask further questions of you. I might hand over to you. Thank you, Michelle.

Michelle McLAUGHLIN: Thank you, Alison, for this privilege of coming on to talk about our experience with Little Blue Dinosaur Foundation, which was established in 2014 after the tragic loss of my son Tom McLaughlin, who unfortunately was hit by a driver on a regional road near a coastal beach hamlet in the New South Wales Central Coast area. Following that family tragedy we set about establishing our foundation. What we have achieved since is collaborations with 73 local government areas. We do two signage and media campaigns providing community awareness and education regarding key messaging, Hold My Hand and Slow Down, Kids Around.

In differing environments, such as ones where Australian families travel to for holidays, these physical environments can look very different to what children may be familiar with at home. For example, they might not have the curb and gutter. They might not have line markings to indicate that it is a road, or the demarcation of a road with curb and guttering. And often they might not have footpaths, which would be a key visual cue to a child to help keep them away from the road—to know to go and stand there. We have for nine years worked on this program, expanding it. We also do work regionally with councils on the playground signage campaign, because a lot now are choosing to fence their playgrounds and separate children from roadways—as we have done successfully with pool fencing—and then adding the infrastructure to it, being the key, essential lifesaving message of Hold My Hand. Then more recently in the last two years Little Blue Dinosaur, in its efforts to prevent child fatalities and serious injuries, received a federal government grant through the National Office of Road Safety. We investigated with the University of New South Wales. Seven LGAs in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria were involved, and 70 kindergartens, as you call them—in New South Wales we call them preschools—and we did an educational intervention there measuring the impact of educating parents and carers, which we believe is where it is at. We need to help expand the messaging around the child's cognitive, physical and perceptual limitations, which it would appear many families are not aware of, in that the child's peripheral vision is still developing. Their hearing—it is often hard for them to discern where a motor vehicle might be travelling from if they cannot necessarily see it or be seen by the oncoming motorist because they are shorter in stature. They are certainly not good at the higher critical thinking skills around the judgement of speed and distance when crossing a road. Our research, in looking at 335 coronial cases from all around every jurisdiction in Australia over the last almost two decades, indicated that in nearly all the cases where the children died, at the time of death they had either ambiguous supervision, so there was an adult or adults present—perhaps the supervision was diluted because one parent or carer thought the other one was watching or holding the child's hand—or there was no parental supervision whatsoever. I think if more Australian parents and carers knew about the cognitive issues and the rationale for why holding a child's hand is so important—it is a simple life-saving thing to do that does not cost any money, and it is as important as putting a seatbelt on a child in a vehicle.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Michelle. We will head to questions so we get a variety of information from you and from Little Blue Dinosaur. I appreciate your time today. Jess, I might go to you first.

Jess WILSON: Thanks very much, Chair. Michelle, thank you so much for your time today, and to Bruce, and for your submission. Just picking up on your final point there about how important it is around that sort of education, I suppose, and that it does not cost anything—I presume you mean in terms of sharing that information does not cost anything, but how could the Government support education programs so that people did understand the importance of sharing that information and teaching that information? What are some of the ways that that could be put out there more broadly into the community, given that it is maybe not as well understood today, and how could the State Government potentially fund programs to do that?

Michelle McLAUGHLIN: Sorry for the confusion there. I just meant in the simple parent chat about holding hands doesn't cost anything.

Jess WILSON: I know exactly what you mean, but I suppose we are sort of thinking how can we help you?

Michelle McLAUGHLIN: Well, we have obviously won grants, and I have had six from the New South Wales Government that have allowed me to expand our signage and media campaigns. We do one annual one and we provide a suite of communication tools. Social media is very powerful. We do TV work as well. As a mother who has lost a child, obviously that is impactful to reaching the community in an effort to moderate behaviour. Sometimes governments spend and invest a lot of money on campaigns, and they have not always been as successful as they would have hoped, and I think that is evident in the statistics. We have looked at the BITRE data—but over the last 10 years there were 587 deaths of children in this country where they may have been a pedestrian, a passenger or in a vehicle. That is more than one child a week. Certainly there have been periods where there has been a bit of an ebb and things have settled down for a while, but for the most part for 19 years the data that we have retrieved and analysed has indicated that statistic is staying the same. It is the most common cause of death of children in Australia, and I think the collaboration together on such media campaigns, on infrastructure enhancement, like the colourful signage we do that is designed to engage with children and families and grandparents in that infrastructure, is made more effective by that messaging. Certainly, as documented by the academics I have worked with and discussed the signage with, is cost effective. Even with our recent pilot, we were able to give 70 preschools a suite of books, parent-carer education flyers, wristbands and 'Hold my hand' messaging. We also gave them posters which covered just about every scenario that you could have: riding your bike, when walking to school, in the driveway, at the beach, on holidays and so on. The educational packages were talked about in discussion groups in the kindergarten for a solid two weeks—the program basically went for six weeks; we did the pre- and post-survey testing—but we gave them a whole lot of assets which were very well received. When we tested the knowledge, parents had taken it on board, and it was reasonably, I feel, cost-effective at \$750 per kindergarten. That was done with federal government funding. Our foundation cannot afford, obviously, to roll that out without that kind of support on its own, but it is certainly very achievable for us to do, and we demonstrated that with the pilot.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Michelle. Anthony, I might go to you next.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Michelle, for appearing and all the work that you do. As a father of two young daughters, I really appreciate it in that regard too. I just want to go back to some of your opening remarks there and focus on, I guess, the general dangers for child pedestrians. If you can sort of walk us through a little bit more, around the different roadway environments that children do interact with on a day-to-day basis and what dangers parents or schools or road authorities should be more aware of. From a government point of view, what can government and local authorities do better to embed those road environments from a child's perspective in the policy process to make sure we are designing infrastructure in a way that makes provision for the needs of child pedestrians so it is safer for them and families?

Michelle McLAUGHLIN: Well, I think, as I said, putting signage on infrastructure is important. We are looking to start a trial later this year with the City of Port Phillip council. We are in talks with them at the moment. We are talking about a school environment and enhancing a simple pedestrian crossing, with a decal, just before the footpath with 'Hold my Hand', because it really is important, and I do not think the message is clear enough to parents about the cognitive limitations of children. Those aged 11 and under require that handholding and supervision of a parent. They should not be, as I see very often, walking to school or scootering or bike riding on their own because they do not have the cognitive wherewithal or, as I mentioned, peripheral vision. It is dangerous, and I think there is a real deficit in the knowledge base. I guess with that

education this could be done through schools; it should be part of the orientation. Also, our research recently highlighted that it is not something that you can just do once or twice. We need to be at it and doing regular reminding. It is not something that is just a one-off thing. We need to obviously collaborate together. As I said, with my situation I do not just say to councils, 'We want to give you this signage and media campaign, and you handle it.' I have been very pleased to have the opportunity to be involved and be the face of that and someone that is out there in front of parents, with MPs, with teachers and parents and having those discussions. I think that has been really proven to be quite successful over the last nine years.

And then with the holiday time situation, there are three to four months a year where children are en masse in our community. Okay, some of them stay in the city, but some travel to regional areas, and we do know that if you have a crash in a regional zone, it does take longer for emergency services to get to you. I think some of these environments are beautiful, naturally, and we do not want to overburden them with a lot of infrastructure, but it could be something like the work Little Blue Dinosaur does with temporary signage, which is really impactful for that holiday period. Perhaps you can even look at slowing the speed limits down during holiday periods in these areas, down to 40, because we all know that that buffers—90%, if they do collide with a vehicle, will survive. I think with children, because they are small, they do unfortunately tend to be fatal incidents, even in driveways. But if we could look at that, I think there are cost-effective ways to do it. We have worked certainly very successfully with the Mornington Peninsula shire for the last seven years, and where they had some fatalities there at Rosebud, initially I was contacted by police and highway patrol, Vic Police, asking how could they work with Little Blue Dinosaur. They went to the TAC and they got some funding and away we went with it down there, and there have been zero fatalities there since. So I think these little short campaigns, these colourful, engaging campaigns, are very, very useful and cost effective.

But yes, we do need to talk about differing environments. Little Blue Dinosaur did actually work with Transport for NSW on their Safety Town website. We did Out and About with Sophie and Tom, who are my children, and it was an education asset that 500,000 students in New South Wales can go to at that period—holiday time, Christmas time. Things are pretty quiet and the workload has finished for the year in the curriculum—what do you do? Well, you could be doing some very good, useful time management there in talking about holiday time road safety for parents and children.

Bruce MORRIS: Alison, could I just add a comment?

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely.

Bruce MORRIS: The other advantage with the Little Blue Dinosaur Foundation material is that it is quite bright, it catches the attention of parents and children, particularly. If we could have this the same across the country, that gives a tremendous advantage of the messaging being more easily repeated and followed through. I also think it is really worthwhile having a good look at what was done at the City of Casey—that is where the 10 preschools were. They were given a two-page flyer, which explained the differences and the reasons why children are more vulnerable—one targeted for the parents and one targeted for the child at preschool or at kindergarten. The advantage would be if that could be rolled out, but it really needs the signage to then reinforce it. And then with the templates that we are looking at with the City of Port Phillip, they would add that messaging, because a lot of people when they are walking around currently or these days are looking at their phone and they are looking down, and they would see that signage as they walk onto—and that would remind them very much of the importance of that.

One other thing that I would like to try to have happen is in all the road safety strategies we recognise that there are vulnerable people, which covers all pedestrians, basically anybody not in a vehicle. I think it would be really wonderful if we could expand that and acknowledge that there are extra vulnerable or extremely vulnerable people. That is obviously children under 11, but it is also disabled, infirm, aged. The huge difference that I see between those two principal groups is that people recognise that the disabled, the aged and the infirm have limitations, and they understand and respect those limitations. People do not understand that children have very similar limitations, and we need to educate people about those limitations. If we could have it recognised that children are very vulnerable, we might be able to get that information more readily flowing across the community.

If we could replicate what we did with the kindergartens in the City of Casey more broadly and, as Michelle said earlier, to then have that information included in the orientation for children before they start primary school or when they go to prep grade to reinforce what they would have already been exposed to in kindergarten, the advantage is then we have also educated a whole pile of parents who are our drivers. It does

not mean we get to all the drivers, but we get to a very large percentage of the drivers and have them more aware of the limitations of children.

The CHAIR: Interesting, Bruce. Yes, I appreciate you adding that. It is a lifelong education process really, isn't it? From the very youngest—

Bruce MORRIS: Yes. We need to start when they are at kindergarten and continue to reinforce it.

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely. I wish we could chat a little bit longer today and I am sorry we have only got a few questions to you. But we have to wrap it up there because we have others waiting for the next part of the hearing. Can I just say that if there is anything further that we did not discuss today that you would like to add or put further into your submission, please do not hesitate to contact the Committee again, because we would certainly benefit from any extra input that you would like to add today. Thank you for your time. Thank you for your submission and thank you for answering our questions today.

Bruce MORRIS: Equally, Alison, if there is anything else that you guys want to ask of us, we would both be more than happy to respond to any questions that you guys may have.

The CHAIR: Absolutely. Thank you very much. We really appreciate that. Thank you very much for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.