

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Increase in Victoria's Road Toll

Melbourne—Tuesday, 21 July 2020

(via videoconference/teleconference)

MEMBERS

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Mr Andy Meddick

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr David Davis

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

WITNESS

Ms Julie-Anne O'Brien, TAC L2P Coordinator, Darebin Information, Volunteer & Resource Service.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the Increase in Victoria's Road Toll. I wish to welcome members of the public that are watching via the live broadcast.

All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. However, any comment you make outside this 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, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

We welcome your opening comments, but I ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion and questions. Could you please state your name for the benefit of our Hansard team, and then begin your presentation. Over to you, Julie-Anne.

Ms O'BRIEN: Hello. Thank you. My name is Julie-Anne O'Brien from Darebin Information, Volunteer & Resource Service. Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the committee and for the chance to speak to you today. My submission was in relation to point 7 of the terms of reference and specifically suggested the application of the successful L2P model to drivers from new arrival communities to help increase road safety.

My organisation provides services to disadvantaged community members in Darebin, including services such as emergency relief and the L2P program. Through offering our services and that program specifically, we receive many inquiries from people who are outside of the eligibility criteria for L2P, particularly from new arrival communities looking for assistance to learn to drive. We also have many applicants for the L2P program from new arrival communities who cite not having a parent or adult to drive with as their reason for applying to the program. Feedback from other L2P coordinators is that they also get similar requests from these community groups. This led us to apply to Darebin City Council for a small amount of pilot funding to offer a program to this section of the community, which we were successful in receiving, based on the L2P model. In promoting the program we received many applications from people outside of the Darebin area, showing a wider interest and need for the program across Melbourne.

Not being able to gain meaningful driving experience and a licence has a significant impact on people's ability to engage in education, employment and community life, but it also puts drivers, their passengers and the wider community at risk. Gaining a licence can be difficult for people from new arrival communities. It is often financially prohibitive to pay for professional driving lessons, people from these groups often lack the social networks to find a licensed driver to practise with and it can be difficult to understand the process to gain a licence and the local road rules for people in an unfamiliar country with limited English.

When putting together my submission to the committee it was difficult to find specific statistics on this cohort for Darebin, but anecdotal evidence from police, caseworkers, other L2P coordinators and clients themselves tells of unlicensed driving by some of these community members; sharing a licence between families or friends; limited knowledge of local road rules, leading to unsafe driving; unsafe practices such as not properly restraining children in cars; and relying on learner drivers to be the main driver of the family. This puts these people at risk of not only being involved in a crash or injury but also entering the justice system.

As referred to in my submission, the Darebin Information, Volunteer & Resource Service pilot was based on the L2P model. A review of this L2P program by Deloitte in 2018 found that it contributed to a reduction in crashes, a reduction in the cost to the community as a result of these crashes, a reduction in unlicensed driving, increased driver safety and risk perception, and increased community connectedness. We do not have the results from our pilot program as yet as the program was suspended due to COVID-19—and we have sought an extension from council—but the experiences so far of participants have been very positive. I believe that a similar program to L2P focused on drivers from new arrival communities could achieve similar results and be of great benefit to the community, and I would encourage the committee to give it consideration.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Julie-Anne. I really enjoyed your presentation on this important issue of migrant driver training because obviously it is an area of disadvantage and an area that a lot more work could be done. I will not ask a question for now, so I will go to Mr Finn, then Mr Gepp then Bev. We will go in that order. And then we will come back, and if we have got time, I will ask a question.

Mr FINN: Thank you, Julie-Anne, for your comprehensive address this morning. One issue that I think is crucial to this whole area—and it is not just new arrivals but it also extends to an area that you are probably not all that familiar with, and that is tourists from overseas—is the grasp of the language. Now, myself—I would never go to a country with another language that I did not understand and get behind the wheel of a car, because, quite frankly, I would probably make a complete galah of myself at the very least. My concern is that we are in certain instances, in a number of instances that I have seen over the years, putting people behind the wheels of cars when they have no understanding of English. They cannot read the signs, and they have a great deal of trouble doing what we would normally expect drivers to do. Obviously there is a challenge for you in that. How are you dealing with that?

Ms O'BRIEN: Obviously with the L2P model the way our program works is that we assess drivers using a professional driving instructor, and the L2P model does allow for a certain number of professional lessons. So we do need to make sure that the learners are safe to drive with a mentor who is not a qualified driving instructor. But once that assessment has been made and they are matched with a mentor, the volunteers guide the learners through all of that process of learning the basic skills but also teaching them about the road rules, following road signs—that sort of thing. With the migrant driver pilot we have only had one instance where English was enough of a barrier that it could cause an issue with communication in a car, but the person we were working with had a case worker that was able to access an interpreter to come along in the car to help out. We did also have a screening process for applicants so that, just from a safety point of view, if their English was very limited and they were not able to communicate safely in the car we were able to refer them to English classes to work on their skills so that they could communicate safely in the car.

Mr FINN: So you will not actually accept anybody for this program unless their English is up to scratch, as it were.

Ms O'BRIEN: Yes, enough to be able to communicate safely with the volunteer. But we did provide a follow-up. We did not just say 'No' and leave them to it; we did refer them to other sources where they could gain English skills, and we were working with a local provider to focus those English lessons around driving and road rules so that they could practise in learning that.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you for your presentation. I am a great supporter of L2P, and I was very supportive of it when I was a councillor in my country electorate. I know the good work that is done. I am fully supportive of councils actually contributing to this program, and I think it is something that they could do that would be far more useful than some of the other things they get involved in, like international affairs and so on. Anyway, we just had a presentation prior to your presentation of what looked like a very exciting program that is interactive and uses gaming and artificial intelligence and so on, and it would seem like a very good thing to be able to introduce into the situation that you are involved in. Maybe there are community hubs or some such locations where it could be introduced. I wonder if either maybe you have read their submission or the committee could furnish you with the presentation to see if that would not also assist your cohort, because I totally accept that you have an issue with new immigrants coming into the country who actually do not even think they need to get a licence. In some of our country areas we have had that example. We could incorporate both the L2P plus the previous program that we looked at, which looked very exciting and hopefully may be going into schools. And my apologies—I am going to have to leave the inquiry for a short time now.

Ms O'BRIEN: Just in response to that, I have not seen that program that you are referring to. It certainly sounds very promising. It could be very useful. As you started to refer to there, it might be something that we would need to be able to offer through community hubs, just I guess in recognition that not everyone might have access to the internet and a computer at home to be able to access that sort of program. But, yes, I will have a look at it, thank you.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you, Julie-Anne, for your submission and for coming along and talking to us today. I just wanted to follow up on the previous question from Bev in relation to simulation training. Do you think the participants in your program would benefit from some simulation training in terms of boosting some

confidence before they actually go out on the roads and start learning, through a simulation process that is language appropriate as well so it caters to their particular needs?

Ms O'BRIEN: Certainly it does sound like it could be useful in I guess raising risk perception skills in those drivers. Part of the benefit, though, of learning that stuff on the road with a mentor is also the social connection and I guess other things that might pop up, other skills or questions that drivers might have along the way. Perhaps it could be a mixture of both approaches going forward to gain the maximum benefit.

Mr TARLAMIS: Absolutely. I think it is fair to say that no amount of simulation can replace the actual real-life experience as well. So my personal view is there needs to be a combination of both, and I think they complement each other very well if you get that balance right. In terms of the volunteer trainers that you have involved in your program, what level of training do they have?

Ms O'BRIEN: Fortunately for our trainers for the pilot we were able to access the L2P mentor training. We did actually have some of my existing L2P mentors who volunteered to work on both programs, so they came already with training and experience that they could lend to the migrant driver program. But for inquiries from new volunteers that wanted to participate we did get permission for the short term to be able to access the L2P training. So that is full-day training where they go through a classroom-based series of scenarios and questions brushing up on different road rules and approaches to working with learners and then an in-car session where they practise a real-life scenario. Mentors need to pass that training and get signed off as well as going through a number of other checks and balances such as a police check, working with children check, licence check through VicRoads and reference checks.

Mr TARLAMIS: And how many participants have you got in the pilot program?

Ms O'BRIEN: At the moment it is suspended, again because of COVID-19. I have not got the exact numbers for you today. I was not coordinating that program; that was another staff member. I believe it was around a dozen members. I am aware of two other programs in Melbourne. One is DriveLink through Moonee Valley, which has been running for several years successfully. I think they offer the program to around 30 participants per year, but I cannot give you 100 per cent confirmation on those numbers. And there is another program based in Epping. But as I said, as far as I am aware they are the only programs that have been running, and they are also inundated with calls from people from outside of their area wanting to participate as well.

Mr TARLAMIS: Just finally, in terms of newly arrived migrants and people trying to navigate the system, are there any practical changes or ways in which we could try and make the system easier to navigate when getting a licence or converting from an international licence to a local licence?

Ms O'BRIEN: Yes, that is a good question. I would say a lot of it is knowledge, so there are some countries where our licence is recognised and there are less conditions to apply for a Victorian licence. A lot of those countries are not the Asian and Arab countries, the Middle Eastern countries that we get applications from. Information in community languages would be good, and maybe an extension, because if you have just arrived in the country and you have only got six months to convert your licence, you are dealing with a lot of other issues in your life and you might not get around to it within the six months, so in effect there could be some leeway there. I guess there is assistance again with English, as Mr Finn spoke of before—that if you have limited English, that makes everything a bit more difficult—and being able to participate in a program such as ours if we are able to continue to operate our program. Our participants have to go away and brush up on their English and then come back to us. It does extend the time it would take for someone to work their way through the process and get the experience to get a licence at the other end.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you, and best of luck with the remainder of the pilot; hopefully you can get it back up and running soon.

Ms O'BRIEN: Thank you.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Julie-Anne. Just a couple of things. Culturally the different groups would have driving instructors, so I think if they are not going there that is obviously, I would think, coming back to the financial costs. How do we get around that?

Ms O'BRIEN: One of the issues with driving instructors can also be that a lot of them are male, so finding a female driving instructor for some of these groups is important, and then cost definitely. Child-care arrangements, we have found, are an issue for some of our participants—single mothers who have children to manage while they are doing their driving. But definitely the cost of lessons is prohibitive, so that is where a model like L2P works really well, because there is an allowance for a number of professional lessons to ensure safety in L2P. We use it to make sure that drivers are learning from their mentors the good practices and skills and that they are ready to go for their licence at the end of the experience. But being able to use trained volunteers who are experienced and want to work with these community groups can save, obviously, a lot of money for these participants.

Mr BARTON: The other thing too with the L2P program: you say that the age limit cuts people out. What is the age limit?

Ms O'BRIEN: It is for learners aged between 16 and 21, although recently for people who meet the criteria—I guess for people who are more disadvantaged—we can push that out to 23. The graduated licensing system means that once learners are 21 they do not need to get the 120 hours of driving experience; that is only up until the age of 21. For that 21 to 23 age group we still do assist people in that group, but they might need less time—they might need 80 hours, for instance, of experience rather than the full 120.

Mr BARTON: And would you advocate for a lifting of that age limit altogether?

Ms O'BRIEN: For the migrant driver program, definitely, not for L2P—I think that is quite specific, and there are reasons why that is limited to that age group. But as I said, we do have many people who are outside of that age group that we are not able to assist who really do need the help. We have had people in our pilot who were in their 50s, for example. We have got a wide range of ages for people in our pilot. I would say that that applies to the other two programs that they are operating as well.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Julie-Anne. Good luck with your pilot.

Ms O'BRIEN: Thank you.

Mr MEDDICK: Well, pretty much everyone stole my thunder on a great deal of questions, so I would just like, if you can please, to expand. I take note of the problem of not having enough women instructors, and sometimes this is cultural and sometimes this is due to the fact that some women who might, for instance, be fleeing domestic violence situations, where they have been prohibited from getting a licence by their partner because that has been a form of control, do not feel comfortable having a male instructor. Can you expand on this? Is there any way that you can think of that we can expand the cohort of qualified female instructors to assist these people?

Ms O'BRIEN: That is, yes, a very good question, and that is definitely the case. In L2P I am lucky in Darebin that I do have a female driving instructor, which makes life a lot easier, but I know that in other areas, where they have only got access to a male instructor, it means that people are on the waiting list for a long time, until they are over 18 and their families are more willing to let them go into a car with a male instructor. Perhaps recruitment specifically aimed at women could be useful. I am not sure what the barriers are as to why there are not as many female instructors, but yes, it would definitely help out if there were more of them around.

The CHAIR: The question that I had to ask has also already been asked by previous speakers, and you have answered. So in that sense we might wrap up actually. On behalf of the committee I wish to thank the Darebin Information, Volunteer & Resource Service and yourself for that presentation. Hopefully you can return to doing your important work as soon as possible, because it is important, especially with the migrant driver program and the L2P program, which we have heard so much about. Even before this inquiry I had heard a lot about of it, and I am familiar with the Moonee Valley program too. So hopefully you can return. I really appreciate and enjoyed your presentation. Thank you, Julie-Anne.

Ms O'BRIEN: Thank you, everyone. All the best.

Witness withdrew.