

Economy and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into the use of school buses in rural and regional Victoria

Government response

Executive Summary

The Government thanks the committee members for their report into the use of school buses in rural and regional Victoria.

We are focussed on building a public transport system that every Victorian can rely on. Victoria's Bus Plan, released in 2021, sets out how we will deliver a modern, productive, environmentally sustainable bus network that increases the number of people choosing to take the bus by delivering simple, safe, reliable and comfortable journeys

Victoria's Bus Plan prioritises the system as a whole, bringing together opportunities across the networks, bus fleet, performance, commercial, innovation and customer experience. It includes actions the Government is already delivering and the reform objectives that, together with industry will provide a bus system that is more attractive and useful for all Victorians, ensuring buses play a stronger role in a transport network critical to growing a more prosperous, more liveable and more connected Victoria.

We are also building new schools across Victoria, and we want students to be able to get there by bus, bike or walking rather than relying on car travel. The safety of children is not only an issue for planning school bus services, but is critical to planning and delivery of all public transport services.

Following the release of Victoria's Bus Plan work has progressed with the development of the implementation plan and approach to reform, including considering how to address the school bus network in rural and regional Victoria.

Whilst planning for future bus services is an ongoing task, we are taking immediate action. The 2022/23 Budget provided \$25 million for new school bus services which are being progressively delivered across the state with new school buses already running in places like Ballarat, Donnybrook and Rockbank.

The 2022/23 State Budget includes in total \$108.5 million to improve local bus services in growth areas, implement bus reform, improve accessibility and customer outcomes and to get students to school. This includes:

- improvements to bus routes connecting Kilmore residents to the town centre;
- improvements and service uplifts to Gisborne town bus services;
- improvements and uplifts for bus routes between Torquay and Armstrong Creek and Marshall and Geelong;

- a high frequency weekday shuttle bus between the Donnybrook and Craigieburn Stations as well as upgrades to the Craigieburn Station Bus Interchange; and
- new services for communities in Sunbury and Diggers Rest.

The 2021/22 budget provided an additional \$60.6 million output funding and \$13.7 million asset funding for bus service improvements and reform for service changes and extensions across Victoria including school special changes for Shepparton and Horsham.

Since 2015, the Government has invested approximately \$180 million in new bus rolling stock for the public transport network including \$26.66 million for 236 buses for use in Country and Regional Bus Services, and \$71.73 million for 664 buses as part of School Bus Contracts.

The Committee's findings and recommendations highlight the need for Government to consider the whole system when improving public transport, taking every opportunity for existing services to be used as efficiently and effectively as possible. Whilst the committee's inquiry and report will continue to inform the implementation of Victoria's Bus Plan over time, the Government's response to the specific recommendations of the committee are set out below.

Response to Specific Recommendations

Recommendation 1

That the Victorian Government explore options to:

- **inform local communities of spare capacity on school buses, before downsizing buses on School Bus Program routes with declining patronage**
- **convert under-utilised School Bus Program services to public transport routes in areas with high demand, where the school buses comply with the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002.**

Supported in full.

The Department of Transport and Planning is not aware of any specific examples of communities where buses were removed without informing the local community prior, and would not take such action without an extensive consultation process with local schools.

As metropolitan Melbourne expands into the growth areas of the outer suburbs, public transport bus services will replace school bus services as more public transport services are implemented into these areas, removing the need for specific school bus services.

Recommendation 2

That the Victorian Government direct individual school bus networks to allocate seating for the general public at the front of the bus where capacity allows. This policy should only be pursued where it does not impact student access to the bus.

Supported in part.

The existing School Bus Program policy encourages seat allocation to manage student behaviour and to protect the safety of very young travellers. This can be coordinated at the school level. The Department of Education will consult with schools to inform consideration of options to encourage the general public to be seated at the front of a school bus service in appropriate circumstances.

Recommendation 3

That the Victorian Government mandate a requirement for CCTV cameras to be installed on new school buses as they come into operation in the School Bus Program.

Not supported.

Around 90 school buses are replaced each year under the State contracts. Many new buses are coming with CCTV technology already enabled. However the Government does not support *mandating* the installation of CCTV. Whether CCTV technology is installed in each bus needs to be balanced against cost, appropriateness and the available technologies. The use of CCTV on school buses must also adhere to the Department of Education's privacy policy.

Recommendation 4

That the Victorian Government, when helping school bus operators to implement the new Child Safe Standards in 2022, ensure that parents, school communities and young people have input in the formulation of Child Safe Policies. Such policies should be communicated widely to parents, school communities and young people.

Supported in full.

The Department of Transport and Planning and the Department of Education will ensure that parents, school communities and young people have input into the formulation of child safe policies.

Recommendation 5

That the Victorian Government streamline the application process for the general public to use the School Bus Program, looking in particular at whether both a Working with Children Check and a verbal reference are required.

Supported in full.

Opportunities to further streamline the application processes for the general public to use school buses will be delivered where it is possible to do so without compromising the safety of students. Consistent with the requirement to comply with the Child Safe Standards set out in the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005 (Vic), an assessment of the person's risk to the safety of children is a crucial starting point. The Department of Education will continue to require the general public to provide a Working with Children Check when applying for travel on the school bus.

Recommendation 6

That the Victorian Government progress the roll out of the School Bus Management System statewide as a matter of urgency.

Supported in part.

Through the Victoria's Bus Plan the Government will be prioritising improvements to the system as a whole, bringing together opportunities across the networks, bus fleet, performance, commercial, innovation and customer experience. This includes building on the achievements of the SBMS, and to date 23 out of 312 school bus networks have transitioned to the SBMS.

Recommendation 7

That the Victorian Government ensure the School Bus Management System allows members of the public to know if there is spare capacity on their desired School Bus Program route before they begin an application to use a bus.

Supported in full.

Currently, members of the public can contact the coordinating school for advice on seat availability before they travel, or they can apply online via the SBMS for a seat. Opportunities to streamline the application processes for the general public to use school buses will be delivered where it is possible to do so without compromising the safety of students.

Recommendation 8

That the Victorian Government identify which components of the New South Wales Transport Connected Bus Program can be adapted for use in Victoria, in particular the use of real-time data.

Supported in full.

New and emerging technologies will be taken into account with the implementation of Victoria's Bus Plan.

Recommendation 9

That the Victorian Government, in consultation with local communities in rural and regional Victoria, consider the potential for the School Bus Program to form part of an integrated transport policy that makes use of technology and innovative service models, such as on-demand transport.

Supported in full.

The Department of Transport and Planning is already trialling the use of on-demand transport to understand how it can best fit within future bus networks. The Government will consider the whole system when improving public transport, taking every opportunity for existing services to be used as efficiently and effectively as possible. Victoria's Bus Plan prioritises the system as a whole, bringing together opportunities across the networks, bus fleet, performance, commercial, innovation and customer experience.