

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Friday, 17 September 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

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

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

WITNESS (*via videoconference*)

Mr Nick Foa, Head, Transport Services, Department of Transport.

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

I wish to acknowledge 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 Chair of the committee. I would like to introduce my fellow committee members: Mr Mark Gepp, Mr Lee Tarlamis, Mrs Beverley McArthur and Mr Andy Meddick.

To the witness 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 the 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 10 to 15 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion and questions. Could you please begin by stating your name for the benefit of our Hansard team and then start your presentation. Over to you, Nick.

Mr FOA: Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. It is a pleasure to be here with you this morning on a really important matter for Victoria. My name is Nick Foa, and I am the Head of Transport Services for the Department of Transport. I do not have a prepared PowerPoint, unlike my colleague Mr Bates from education. We gave some content for his presentation around the structure of how the contracts and the procurement of various school bus programs work. But what I would like to do is just draw out some elements of bus planning at a statewide level and then dig down to the school bus programs as well.

As Mr Bates went through with you, it is a shared responsibility between the departments of education and transport. But we do work very, very closely together in our teams, and that can be evidenced by our development of the software management system that has now transferred across to DET to be incorporated into their systems. We note that DET also administers the students with disability program and the conveyancing program, and our role is really in that procurement space of the School Bus Program and the school bus specials and how we then integrate those and get some synergies between our other route bus contracted services and our school bus services. So we plan and manage the school bus services program and often incorporate those contracts into other timetabled transport contracts where possible. This is becoming even more important on the fringes of Melbourne, for instance, and our teams are collectively working around the elements of the entire bus ecosystem around those new and emerging communities.

I note that we have sent some detailed answers in to questions, so I do not necessarily want to go and just read back through that. But I thought I would just make some brief comments around *Victoria's Bus Plan*, which was recently released to the public by Minister Carroll, and that really sets out how we start to deliver a modern, productive, environmentally sustainable bus network through reforming the network. We know how important bus is even in times like today. I dragged the figures earlier today. Public transport during COVID right now is down to 13 per cent of baseline levels. Bus is still at 25 per cent in metro and 30 per cent in regional. We know that it is really, really important for lower socio-economic groups in our community or communities where there is just no other option, and so it is an incredibly important service. Yesterday's stats show that there was an equal number of people being moved by bus in the state of Victoria as there was by rail, and that is quite an unusual statistic to see. Normally it is three times rail to the bus network, so it is really important that we have done this broader plan that sets out the role that bus plays in our community going forward.

One of the pillars of that plan is around school routes and having buses to meet demand spikes from students travelling to and from school on routes, and we also in the last budget announced that we are adding some growing services in those growing communities that I mentioned—The Lakes in South Morang, St Helena in Eltham, Officer Secondary College, Elevation college in Craigieburn, Alamanda in Point Cook, Oberon in Armstrong Creek—and also planning for the new combined high school in Shepparton, which is a really, really important part of that network.

So the five key reforms there in the bus plan are: make the network simpler, faster and more reliable; introduce a cleaner, smarter fleet, the right buses for the right routes—and we can get into a little bit of that later, particularly in relation to accessibility and different types of buses for different jobs; better performing buses—all-door boarding, rapid running, integrated interchanges with the train et cetera is a really important thing; better customer experience; and, lastly, a big area I think for improvement into the future around systems management, data and how we might use technology for growing our bus knowledge and making them more adaptable to different needs within society, underpinned of course by better value for money and being able to partner with the industry.

Just on industry, bus employs over 8000 people in Victoria, and it is a really important part of what we have. We have over 1900 metro routes, 613 buses on regional routes—1456 apply to schools and 427 to the DET special schools, so it is a really significant part of what we do. And, as I say, it moves many, many people around Victoria on a daily basis.

Some of the signature policy commitments within the bus plan: you will have heard of the commitment that all buses post 2025 will be zero-emission purchases, so we are transforming any new purchase of the fleet from 2025 to zero emission, and that will be a mixture of responses from the market, depending on the job that the bus is being asked to do. We do go through a large amount of recontracting, so that 1456 school bus service contracts in 2019 were renegotiated in 2020, and we are starting our regional bus contract renegotiations at the moment.

So, Mr Chairman, I am more than happy to have a broad-ranging discussion about how we provide the infrastructure to give rise to the policy objectives of the Department of Education and Training where, I think, Mr Bates ably set out the child safety principles and about universal access to education being the key policy driver here. But obviously the committee, by way of questioning, has sought to work out how we can sweat those assets perhaps and have them do more in the community. So I am happy to participate in a conversation with you about that.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Nick, for sharing that with us. I was very excited by the government bus plan also. But before going into questions, I might just give committee members an opportunity to continue the discussion, and I might start with the regional MPs first, because the school bus program is predominantly in the regions and rural Victoria. I am just looking at Mr Meddick, then Mr Gepp, then Mrs McArthur, then Mr Tarlamis, in that order, so we will go with the regional MPs first.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Nick, for your presentation. I take it from what your comment was just before you were listening quite intently to your colleague Tony Bates.

Mr FOA: I was in and out of it a bit. I had to do some media about certain public transport matters in the centre of Melbourne tomorrow.

Mr MEDDICK: Yes, yes. That is another topic, isn't it? There were a couple of things that I asked Mr Bates that he was deferring off to you, one of which was that if we move into a situation in rural and regional Victoria, we obviously have far less population; if we are making these buses available at different times outside the 2 hours allocated in the morning and the 2 in the afternoon for other services, bearing in mind the lower population rates and some of these people, Mrs McArthur raised quite rightly, might be elderly people on a pension, are we in a situation where those services have to be subsidised, or do we need to go into a cost-sharing arrangement? Because we do not want to obviously foist the entire financial burden on the contracting bus company, for instance.

Mr FOA: Yes, indeed. It is fair to say, Mr Meddick, that most of our routes—I think all of our routes—are subsidised, that the cost recovery or the fare pricing does not recover all the costs of the fleet. It would be fair to

say that, whilst I think Mr Bates said it may be marginal because you have already got the driver, you have already got the bus and you will be doing more kilometres, I anticipate there would still be a subsidy required.

Mr MEDDICK: Right. So are we basically then talking about a scenario where there is a cost involved that is not necessarily recoverable, but we are looking at it from a point of view philosophically, I suppose, that this is actually an essential service that we are looking to provide so therefore, you know, the balance on a social scale outweighs the physical cost?

Mr FOA: Indeed, and that is certainly how the writing of the business case would need to take that policy proposal forward for funding if it was to be considered. You would be considering a fee for service that would lessen the subsidy required from government, but you would then be weighing up its contribution to the overall public transport effort in terms of accessibility, noting the points you make about those people needing to access those services maybe coming from low socio-economic communities or indeed non-transport-rich environments.

Mr MEDDICK: Fantastic. One of the other ones was just really around that DET had not themselves used, for instance, Engage Victoria to conduct any community surveys on the appetite, if you like, for these types of services. Have DOT done anything of the same, or have you got any plans to?

Mr FOA: Look, I do not believe that we have done any forecast plans around that. We do respond to a range of correspondence that might come in to the minister around people advocating for various bus route upgrades et cetera. We are constantly recording our network data analysis around optimising routes. I would say the most recent timetable change—a greenfield timetable change, the most significant one we have done for many years—came into force this year, which was an extra 450-odd services on the metro train system, but what people did not quite understand is just the significant amount of bus re-timetabling we did to meet all those trains right throughout regional Victoria. That was all informed by our data and network planning crew that really get underneath the demand numbers all the time. They are taking data points from the Victorian Planning Authority about new subdivisions coming on in regional areas, for instance, and taking data points from traffic monitoring and also where new schools are going. So there are multiple different data points coming into then planning what is an appropriate response. And as I mentioned earlier, part of what we are thinking through now is those newer and emerging communities at the interface between regional and metro. Having to stay in the front of those fast-growing communities is quite a challenge.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you so much for that, because you have actually covered off something else that I was going to ask, and that was about, you know, that we are seeing a lot of tree changers, for want of a better word, these days, where a lot of people from metro Melbourne are seeing the benefits of moving out into more regional and rural communities. While some of them have over the past 50-odd years gone into somewhat of a decline, we are actually seeing now a resurgence in those communities. It is certainly true that some of these people will still be working in metro Melbourne in a post-COVID environment, so connecting transport services, for me, is going to be a very important factor. For some of them that do not necessarily have a rail line, having a bus service that takes them to a rail line will be very important, so it is nice to hear that this is on your radar. I am just keen to perhaps hear about whether local councils have anything like a direct line to you to be able to say, 'Hey, you know, we're going to put a new housing estate in. We anticipate having another 450 people moving into that area', for instance. What sort of services? Do we do any forecast planning around that as to when you are going to need them? Is there a service available now with a contractor that they could just expand? Does all of that come across your desk?

Mr FOA: Yes, it does indeed. So to go back to your first point, the kind of renaissance of regional Victoria is right across the state, because people have worked out that they can live and work in a different format, so we are definitely seeing that. Hence the kind of growth that we have just put on—I think it is 125 extra services into Ballarat—and a significant reconstituting of the regional bus services around the Ballarat community to meet those trains coming in. It is a really good opportunity for us to continue to review the regional Victoria routes, and we will do that as part of the bus plan.

In terms of how we work with local communities, yes, we do have a dedicated bus planning team, but we also have throughout regional Victoria in each of our regions a go-to person around public transport in each of the regional structures. So that local intel is really, really important in then feeding back into our central bus planning team, and they are in conversation every single day.

You are right, where we have got new and emerging, fast-growing communities sometimes we will augment routes, and we have just done one in Donnybrook—I think was the last one I signed off on. They come across my desk in terms of proposals around how we might change within our overall bus envelope—can we tweak and change that to maximise the benefit of that? Similarly where we see communities no longer require a bus and we are running a bus for a couple of people or it is empty we will seek to terminate that contract but perhaps redirect that funding back into a service elsewhere in the system. So we are monitoring that all the time.

Mr MEDDICK: Great. Thanks so much. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Gepp.

Mr GEPP: Thanks, Mr Foa, for being with us today, and good luck tomorrow. Just in terms of that last issue that you and Mr Meddick were discussing, the local aspect, if you like, of the service and indeed the considerations that go into it, I am particularly interested in this form and function concept, because we as regional MPs often hear of models and systems that are developed around some of the bigger centres—you know, your Bendigos, your Ballarats, your Geelong and the like. But those systems, those models, have no relevance, for example, to some of the smaller communities out in the Mallee, who are in the middle of nowhere. So I am just wondering how you factor in the bespoke elements of the services for some of those sorts of communities.

Mr FOA: Yes. Thank you. In the school bus sense we are absolutely driven by the process that Mr Bates outlined about how they go through their assessments, and then I think by December each year they give us a forecast of what is likely to be required in the following year. Then we adjust our contracting models according to that. In the regional context again we look at kilometres travelled, use and overall government subsidy per passenger. They are some things that we monitor. So the fewer people on the bus the higher the subsidy. I think diesel is the same—the cost of the driver, the diesel and the bus is pretty similar. So we monitor all of those elements.

But it is reasonably impressive when you look at the route map where we cover in regional Victoria. There is a pretty impressive web that comes across regional communities. I think frequency is the main feedback we get from regional Victoria. It might be a couple of hours rather than the frequency that Melbourne is slowly getting to, where bus becomes a really viable replacement for heavy rail or indeed the private car, as we are seeing on the Doncaster corridor, for instance. That is all a driver of frequency, and people in regional Victoria have a high reliability score, but it is a low frequency number. So those are the sorts of things that we would factor in, but particularly in the case of where we are getting down to very low numbers of patronage in the school environment we will talk to the education department about the access to the other subsidy programs that they have, and potentially that is a better response than running an empty bus for a couple of people.

Mr GEPP: Who makes that decision? I am interested in that because, I mean, I can absolutely see in regional Victoria places where that would work, but I am thinking in a place like Mildura, for example, where we have got school bus services where people are living outside of the Mildura city limits and they are out in the farms. What you do not tend to get as the population shift—Mr Meddick talked about, you know, people moving into regional—is you do not tend to get the explosion of population in those places as you might in other centres. Now, as costs go up, obviously subsidy costs would also increase because you are not increasing patronage. So in that environment who is making the decision about the continuation of that service or some sort of alternate model?

Mr FOA: The Department of Transport would be modelling and making decisions around broad access bus services, route services in those regional areas. We would be working with our department of education colleagues around the school bus service in that area, and essentially the demand requirements for us to provide buses is provided by DET, so they give us a forecast in December about what they think they are going to need the next year. But sometimes during the middle of the year people's circumstances change—the one family that was using it has moved away or changed address or otherwise—and we tweak that as we go along through the year. But it is a bit of an iterative process in the schools space. We work off the forecast demand, then we validate that with the actuals on the ground as it is moving forward. We would not yet act unilaterally to remove a school bus route, even with one or two kids on it, without our conversations going back and forth between us and the department.

Mr GEPP: So we know that in some of those places the cost of running that service is going to be, on a per-head basis, a lot higher than in other parts. And just finally—thank you—in terms of accessibility, so where we do expand the service and we do allow access from the public, is that dependent on the asset having the capability to meet the accessibility standards?

Mr FOA: Yes, it is a tricky one. So under the DSAPT requirements, the disability requirements federally, there is a specific carve-out for school buses, and where we buy new buses for route buses, we go for high-volume, low-floor, which gives us the accessibility on that route bus. The difficulty comes where those low-floor buses have a much longer overhang at the front and back, and so it is more difficult for them to move around an environment that has not been catered for them. So if you look at all the new growth area communities where we have got low-floor accessible buses and accessible stops, you will also see that they have got rollover kerbing on the roundabouts and on the kerbs on the corners. That is primarily to stop the nose and the tail scrapes that can occur, particularly if they are accessing a driveway arrangement or something. So it is more than that. It is more than the accessibility of the bus, it is more than the accessibility of the stop; it is also that the built environment that they are operating in becomes challenging. We do have, I think it is, about 20-odd—that figure might be a bit low—routes that I am aware of where we are doing exactly as you say, taking other passengers on board. But they are not on full disability-accredited buses.

Mr GEPP: I would think, in terms of any considerations for the committee, one of the factors that we would have to contemplate is that in regional and rural Victoria often the school bus stop is a piece of gravel in a bit of a tin shed that protects the kids from the weather, and to make the infrastructure compliant would be astronomical, I would imagine.

Mr FOA: Yes. I do not have a broad number on me but, you know, it would be well in excess of what we put in as an annual subsidy into overall buses per annum. So the capital costs alone would be huge, yes.

Mr GEPP: Yes. Thank you. Thanks, Mr Foa.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Mr Foa. I hope your media went well, and we are pleased that that took priority over the inquiry; it is most important. But anyway, I was interested in a couple of things: the fact that you said there are—did you say—three times more people using buses than trains. Did I get that—

Mr FOA: No. In normal times there are three times more people using trains than buses.

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes.

Mr FOA: What I commented on was that at the moment buses are actually at the same level as trains, as of yesterday's numbers. We had the same amount of people running around in trains as we did buses yesterday, which is quite an unusual number to see.

Mrs McARTHUR: Does that say something about your train service?

Mr FOA: What it says is that during the current period we are in the people using buses generally have less choices and are often coming from a lower socio-economic background or from an area that is not transport rich. They cannot just walk out their front door and jump on a train or a tram, and bus is their option. So it shows the really important role that buses play in communities that have less choices.

Mrs McARTHUR: You are going to have to sing this from the rooftops, aren't you, because there are some in our world who think we ought to get all sorts of public transport off the roads and onto trains, but you will be able to demonstrate that that is just not possible. Anyway, moving on. How much does the school bus system cost the taxpayers of Victoria?

Mr FOA: For the transport costs it is around about \$230 million—and this is just operating—and on top of that you have got the DET numbers for the disability transport system. I do not have that number to hand, and that is perhaps something you would need to follow up with DET. But from a transport perspective our subsidy is about \$230 million.

Mrs McARTHUR: I did ask your colleague in education: is this the most efficient way to run the school bus system, with two departments, or could we streamline you into one operation?

Mr FOA: Look, it is really important that where your policy driver is coming from and the transport response to that policy driver is made is the people that own the service. So what is the service for? It is about access to universal education, and that is the policy driver for this service response. Once the service response is decided, yes, we are going to make sure people get to school, and we are going to do that via a cash subsidy if they cannot make it in one way or we are going to provide a service that is a transportation service. That is when the Department of Transport, which has expertise in procuring and contracting buses, comes in and we work hand in glove. But we make sure that we do not creep into the policy space about who can and cannot get on, and they rely on our expertise around procuring of those services.

It is really important to note too—and I touched on the amount of workers employed in bus—we also have industry policy to consider with our bus manufacturers in the state of Victoria. We try and get as much local product as we possibly can, but if you go out to Dandenong, to Volgren and others, and see new buses being built here in Victoria coming off the production line, it is another really important part of what we do. So making sure we have got a viable supply chain and future purchases lined up to drive a local industry I think is probably best done by Transport. We can do that, and we can use the bus demand to help that local content be as maximised as possible. That is just one example about why it is pretty good to have the current separation.

Mrs McARTHUR: So what you are assuring me is that it is a very efficient operation to have two departments involved in delivering the one service, and we could not make it any better. Both of you have managed to argue the point that you are both essential to delivering the best, most efficient, most cost-effective way of providing bus transport to school users. I would expect you to do that because we do not want to cut one of you out of a job, by any means. But, anyway, that is good. You are both singing from the same hymnbook. This is all good.

Now, did I also understand that we are providing school bus transport for newer peri-urban or urban areas or are schoolchildren getting on the normal bus network to go to school? Because we assume this school bus program is just for rural and regional students, but I may have misheard you. Can you just clarify if there is not a school bus system for peri-urban and urban areas and they are using just normal transport.

Mr FOA: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. It is a really good call-out, because sometimes we do not have a school bus in play and sometimes on the fringes you might have a group not very far away that is getting a subsidised service and access for free and another group having to pay. So it is a constant resetting on the fringe as Melbourne has expanded into those newer communities.

To show you that we are joined at the hip with Education, we actually have a joint planning group that works through those issues, so it does not happen where we open through open the doors for school on day one, and we have not done any planning for it. Shepparton is a great example where there is a consolidation of three schools onto one campus. The bus planning that has gone into that between us and Education has been really, really intense, because we have had to restructure a whole range of routes to ensure that that is the case. But it is the case that we have to plan ahead and try to minimise those issues where you have got a group of students getting a subsidy greater than another group of students who are using a route bus instead of a school bus, and we work through those issues as they arise.

Mrs McARTHUR: But it does beg the question that if it is working safely and feasibly for students to get onto a normal public transport bus to get to their school why all buses could not be used for the public, which is what our inquiry is about. So you are basically assuring us that in these newer areas children are using your very efficient, super public transport system of buses, without incident, I am assuming, and we are wondering why the general public cannot use school buses when it seems to be working well in other areas.

Mr FOA: Chair, I have just turned my camera off for a moment, because I lost a bit of that last question. I hope that you can hear me okay.

The CHAIR: It might assist with connectivity.

Mr FOA: Can you hear me okay, Chair?

The CHAIR: Yes, we can.

Mr FOA: Thank you. Look, we use the school service in metro areas where there is a PT gap that needs to be filled, but not in a fully subsidised sense. We are doing some work around the feasibility of converting some of those metro fringe school bus programs into route-type school specials, as you have seen in other parts of the state. We have done it in about 20 other parts of the state. The primary need of the school specials is, of course, the universal access to education, and we want to make sure that we will have enough capacity for those school buses to do that—and many of them are at capacity. Where we have had people take up the opportunity in regional areas of applying to the school principal for use, it is often in those trade school or VET-type programs. But it is not hugely popular. You know, I think school buses can be reasonably noisy environments as young children go about their day, so it is not necessarily suitable for everybody to want to get on that. But we have seen some use of it for trade and VET students.

Mrs McARTHUR: My question is more to the fact that in these newer areas where you are having to put on new bus services, clearly children will be accessing them to go to schools. Is that without incident?

Mr FOA: So, yes, in newer areas we have been using a mixture of school buses, specials and indeed route buses for people to access school, and that has created circumstances where one group of students is getting a higher level of subsidy than another, and that is something that we do work through in the fringes there.

Mrs McARTHUR: But there are no safety issues?

Mr FOA: Not that have been reported to me. But I would suggest to you that the difference in the outer areas is there would be less primary school travel, and I think in the regional areas there are children as young as six getting on the buses, so I think the risk profile is somewhat different.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. I will leave it there. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, and I think Mr Foa has elaborated on, from what we have heard, different areas of expertise between education and transport here, Mrs McArthur. I know you want to rationalise some of the government departments, but I do not think these are the two you want to touch.

Mrs McARTHUR: They are putting up a very good case to stay big.

The CHAIR: I might move over to Mr Tarlamis to ask the next question. Thank you. Mr Tarlamis.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr Foa, for your answers today and also for the answers you provided in advance to the questions that we supplied to you. There has been a lot of questioning today, and a lot of those have gone to the areas that I wanted to explore. But I did want to come back to one of the elements that you mentioned in your opening comments around the government's recent commitment that from 2025 all new buses in Victoria will be zero emissions and just seek some information about how this commitment will be met in relation to the regional school buses.

Mr FOA: Yes. Thank you for your question, Mr Tarlamis. It is early days for that commitment, obviously. Our teams have been engaging with the market and we have run a trial in route buses already where we have had really good responses, and that was a mixture of everything from hybrid to full electric. We have had lots of people talk to us about hydrogen, different fuel types being used in different settings and what fuel types and fuel mixes and power trains are better for longer haul or coaches and potentially some of the rural settings versus those that might have more access to recharging stations and the like.

Certainly it will be challenging for depots to refit. It is also challenging for the workforce who move from being diesel mechanics to electrical engineers in some cases, and hydrogen is an entirely new supply chain and skill set that does not yet exist. You know, it is a significant reform in that whole sector going forward. Notably New South Wales also have firm commitments in this space, so the supply chains will react accordingly, and we have had lots of high-level conversations with local manufacturers and international suppliers. Often these days they have a consortia approach, so you might get a drive train out of Europe and a bus build locally, and so those drive trains and power packs are likely to be imported in those senses. We are really looking forward to the responses we get from the market going forward, but it is a little early to say all regional school buses will be power pack X or Y, but I think it will need to be a more nuanced approach.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you. You also mentioned in your opening statement around regional bus contracts, the start of the renewal process commencing, I think, if I heard you correctly. Will part of that include things like renewal of the fleet?

Mr FOA: Yes, absolutely. Each time we work into the regional bus contracts we do a fleet assessment around age appropriateness and capability of the fleet, and that forms part of the tenderer's response. Conceivably it is part of the evaluation criteria where one tenderer might come in with some enhancements around accessibility, for instance, and that would have a positive effect on their school.

Mr TARLAMIS: Yes. And how long do the contracts normally run, in terms of the contract period?

Mr FOA: It is not uniform across the state. What we did in 2018 to get better investment from the industry was we sought to renegotiate contracts up to 10 years, and that gives better certainty of the route and better certainty to the provider that they could make some longer term investments.

Mr TARLAMIS: Yes. Just going back to the renewal of the fleet aspect, notwithstanding the issues that were raised earlier around the issues with low-floor buses that can be encountered in rural environments that are not fit for purpose in terms of height, roads and things like that—and other infrastructure—are there opportunities to look at some additional disability-access vehicles within the fleet, expanding that so that as you are replacing the fleet you would look at getting as many disability-compliant buses on board, notwithstanding the fact that you would need to accommodate areas that could not actually facilitate those buses entering?

Mr FOA: Yes, it is a good point. The metro fleet buses also include automated anti-rollaway systems, two-way communication devices, driver screens, two doors for effective boarding and alighting, as well as the low floor, including the boarding ramps and allocated wheelchair spaces. In fact I think it was Ventura that recently showed us some innovations around better securing devices for wheelchairs. So the industry is really responding well to that, and it is something that we want to keep moving the dial on. The current specifications in regard to school buses include seatbelts, additional handholds, high-mounted flashing lights, appropriate warning signs et cetera—you know, the school bus designation. There is an opportunity for us to come up the disability ladder with more improvements, but it goes to the application for the route. If it is a long-haul route, then you are probably going to have a more coach-style bus and therefore you are going to have underfloor storage, which makes it a higher floor with one-door boarding and access and egress. So it depends on the route. If it is for shorter routes that are able to be put together, then potentially it gives you more optionality around what bus you might be able to apply to it.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you. In terms of those additional features, is CCTV capability something that could be, or is, part of the consideration as well so that way, if it was required, it would have that capacity built in already rather than retrofitting it?

Mr FOA: The broad issue of rolling stock technology is something that we look at across all modes at all times. In fact you can go onto your Google app and search up your transport journey and it will have information from our RideSpace feed, where we can show you the real-time location and real-time loading of passengers on metropolitan trains. It will show your where trams are in real time on the PTV app, where buses are in real time on the PTV app. So onboard communications, whether it be CCTV, whether it be bluetooth sensors or whether it be passenger load counters, that is something that as a department we are doing a lot of work on. It fits in with our Smarter Roads initiative, whereby that technology is feeding into our traffic light sequencing, for instance, so we can give buses greater priority at traffic lights. So the technology is increasing all the time. In terms of would CCTV in and of itself adjust the risk profile for the bus, I would have to say we have it in trams and trains, but it is a hindsight use. So it allows you to go back and investigate and look in the rear-view mirror; it does not necessarily increase or decrease the risk profile for what is happening for the bus driver in the bus at the time. That is why, you know, our driver protection screens are really, really important, and bus drivers themselves, particularly through this period of time with COVID—and my thanks go out to them as a community—get exposed to some pretty poor behaviour, and they do an amazing job.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you. That is all of the questions I have.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Nick, for touching on that. My thoughts are also with all the bus drivers. I was at Ventura many years ago, and obviously their employee representatives, the Transport Workers Union and others, have done a great job as essential workers throughout this pandemic—it goes without saying.

I do have one question, which you have kind of probably already semi answered—Mr Meddick raised it with the previous witness, but I thought it might be better directed towards you—about the pilot in Gippsland where you facilitated public access on the school bus. Do you want to just share or expand on that a little bit—the outcomes, the learnings, how that worked and what happened—a bit more, if that is possible?

Mr FOA: Sure, yes. The really important thing the pilot did was, you know: where are the best opportunities? Is it dead running? Is it live running? Or is it downtime? They are the three modes that the bus is in at any time. So it tested those three different stages: dead running, meaning from the depot to the first school; live running with students; and then downtime between the 2 hours in the morning and the 2 hours in the afternoon.

It really did allow some consolidation of policy documentation, instructions to peer principals, signal documents around that—opened a lot of discussions between Bus Victoria and the operators as well as the school communities—and lots of really good eligibility guidelines, flowcharts and standardised application forms, which I think you know, and I think Mr Bates commented, is one area that we can improve upon in terms of the accessibility to these services. It did implement some of their risk management practices to minimise risks to children, enabled a local community centre to be involved to liaise with principals et cetera. So it provided people access to services at a marginal cost during downtime.

That particular trial was really well supported at a leadership level through a local community, through local schools and through leadership within the departments, both Education and us. It really relied on people promoting that there is spare capacity, having sort of a real-time understanding of what that spare capacity was. I talked a bit about our RideSpace app; in that sense we can use technology and leverage data a little better into the future.

Look, I think because of the leadership at a local community level, it went some way to alleviating parents' concerns because it provided a really good sort of risk management approach to parents. But it did require a fair bit of local leadership, and for that to be rolled out at scale there would need to be a larger rollout of the school bus management system, for instance. So you may have some questions around that.

The CHAIR: No. Thank you, Nick. I do not have any additional questions, and I notice that we have filled up the time in terms of the full hour. If any members have maybe one last small question, I will allow it. Otherwise we might maybe keep those questions on notice, Nick, and if we have got any, are you happy for us to just reach out to you?

Mr FOA: Of course.

The CHAIR: Thank you. On that note, committee members, secretariat, that concludes today's hearing. Thank you to everyone for joining. By the way, Nick, I really enjoyed your presentation, and it was a very productive discussion. Thank you again.

Mr FOA: Thank you, Chair. I appreciate it. Thanks, everybody.

Committee adjourned.