

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Tuesday 8 August 2023

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Anthony Cianflone

Wayne Farnham

John Mullahy

Dylan Wight

Jess Wilson

WITNESS

Elyse Cunningham, Sustainable Cities Campaign Organiser, Friends of the Earth Melbourne.

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

All evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's 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.

Thank you for being here today. We will quickly do an introduction, and then we will allow you to do an opening statement if you would like. I am Alison, Member for Bellarine.

Jess WILSON: Jess Wilson, Member for Kew.

John MULLAHY: And John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley

Dylan WIGHT: Dylan Wight, Member for Tarneit

Wayne FARNHAM: Wayne Farnham, Member for Narracan.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

The CHAIR: I will hand over to you.

Elyse CUNNINGHAM: Thank you very much. My name is Elyse Cunningham, and I coordinate the Sustainable Cities collective at Friends of the Earth Melbourne. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you today. As some of you in the room know, Sustainable Cities has been campaigning for better buses in Melbourne for the past couple of years. Our efforts have focused mainly on Melbourne's western suburbs, which have some of the fastest growing local government area populations in the country—those being the City of Melton and the City of Wyndham, with the population of the City of Wyndham now being larger than that of Geelong. In these areas bus services are very low quality, with trips taking sometimes four times as long as a car trip, as well as poor connections and a lack of safe connecting walking and cycling infrastructure. In Melton the average trip by public transport is 71 minutes, whereas by car it takes about 20 minutes. There are no trams in the outer west at all and trains are infrequent, particularly at night and on weekends, with limited stations and in some areas only with access to overcrowded V/Line services. This is leading to a culture of forced car dependency, which increases traffic across the city. This same issue occurs on rural and regional roads.

Our current transport system prioritises cars over public and active transport. In Melbourne's west this means that there are urbanised areas without minimum service, and this is according to the spatial network analysis for multimodal urban transport systems. Forced car dependency, which also exacerbates stress caused by the cost of living and living in a global pandemic, means that we need a mode shift away from cars and towards public transport and walking and cycling.

In order to enable this mode shift we think that the Government needs to commit more funding. The Climate Council in their *Shifting Gear* report recommended that 50% of government transport budgets go towards public transport and 20% towards active. This report was focused around emissions reduction, but the timeline for the Government's emission reduction targets actually aligns quite nicely with your targets for reducing the impacts of unsafe driving. Also the Australian BITRE review noted that a mode shift to public and active transport would likely reduce road trauma. We think that buses are a great place to start and a bit of a silver bullet for solving the issue of road safety, as they require less infrastructure than other modes of public transport and are something that could be rolled out within the next couple of years, enabling more Victorians to opt to use public transport and enabling safety of our roads.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you very much. We will open up to questions, and if we get time we will come back around as well. Jess, would you like to start?

Jess WILSON: Thank you. Thank you very much for your submission and for your presentation. With no train line in my electorate, often the reliance is on buses and trams. One of the issues that often get raised is the lack of frequency of services when it comes to buses, but it can be a chicken-and-egg situation. The services are at what they are at because they are meeting current demand, but if we were to increase services, then we might actually see greater demand from people using the bus network. Do you have a sense or any work that has been done in that space to encourage more users to go on the bus network?

Elyse CUNNINGHAM: I think there are two key points on encouraging people to use the bus network, and they are service level improvement, so I guess that needs to be considered in a way that matches the needs of the community, but also communication and consultation, because in areas where there is a bus running every 50 minutes you are going to have less people using the bus. But we believe that once the service is adequate and there is a fast and frequent network of buses that get people where they need to go, directly to other modes of transport or to the nearest activity centres, then that is inevitably what will lead to the uptake in bus ridership.

The CHAIR: Thank you. John.

John MULLAHY: Public transport usage fell during COVID-19 and the lockdowns, and it has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. How can the Victorian Government encourage people to return to using public transport?

Elyse CUNNINGHAM: It definitely fell, and it has been identified that this is an issue of safety and people feeling concerned about contracting COVID-19 when they are on public transport. But studies done in the European Union have indicated that so long as personal protection and sanitation measures are in place, the risk of contracting COVID on public transport is actually quite minimal. There are probably two elements here. One is education around the realities around the risks of contracting COVID on public transport, and also I think there is a need for perhaps more implementation of safety measures around COVID on public transport, in terms of mask wearing and sanitation. In the research that was conducted in the EU, 70% of respondents said that they would have preferred if mandatory mask wearing had stayed in place. I think this is something that the Government could explore for Victoria. It might be a bit of a different outcome because of the strength of our lockdowns and the experience that we all had as a community, but it would be a good starting point to consult with communities and discover what Victorians are feeling when it comes to safety on public transport.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dylan.

Dylan WIGHT: Thanks, Chair, and thanks, Elyse, for your evidence so far. I wanted to speak to you specifically about buses. I know that you guys have done a lot of work out in the west, and most of the work that you have done on this sort of stuff has been concentrated in the western suburbs, and indeed we have had this conversation previously. In your opinion what is the major change that needs to occur to both encourage more bus use but obviously make sure that those services more adequately cater for people's needs in the west in growing areas like mine, because it is more complex than just more services and more money, isn't it?

Elyse CUNNINGHAM: Yes, it is. It is quite complex, and a lot of it comes down to different rules that have been set at different times of the bus planning process, which to date has been quite an incremental process but there has not really been a moment to transform the bus network to a clean slate grid network, which is what we have been campaigning for. I think one of the things that makes it difficult that could be a very tangible way to restructure the routes is that there is a requirement at the moment that each home needs to be within 400 metres of a bus stop, which is why the bus routes that we have now are quite long and winding and convoluted and running down small streets. Everyone knows the experience of riding a bus in Melbourne—you are sort of getting thrown around the bus—so if we were to transform that into a simple grid with buses running down arterial roads and connecting well with other modes of transport and also interchanges between different bus routes that would enable 10-minute frequencies, and that is using the existing resources that we already have and without much more operating expenditure.

Dylan WIGHT: Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Wayne.

Wayne FARNHAM: Thanks, Chair. Hi, Elyse. Thanks for coming today. Elyse, one thing I would like to touch on is regional Victoria and my electorate in particular, which has two of the fastest-growing LGAs in the

State, being Cardinia and Baw Baw shires. Where can you see the Government improving in regional Victorian in particular? When you mentioned bus times from Melton being 71-minute car trips, that is not much different to regional Victoria. So where can you see the Government improving in regional Victoria in particular?

Elyse CUNNINGHAM: Our work has mostly focused on the outer suburbs of Melbourne, but I know that, for example, recently the City of Ballarat wanted to conduct a review of their bus network, and I think coordinating efforts with local governments who have that real local expertise and knowledge of what is needed from the communities in those areas is a good place to start. If the State can provide that support to local government councils, then I think that is a good solution.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Anthony.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thanks for coming in, Elyse, and thanks for the submission as well. My question is around, firstly, zero-emission buses and any particular views that Friends of the Earth may have around the rollout of zero-emission buses and the role they may play in helping us reduce emissions and encourage more people to take the bus more often down the track. And following on from that as well, in the rollout of zero-emission buses, going back to your point, how can this Inquiry better look at how we recommend to government and Parliament the better design of not just bus routes but also bus infrastructure—things like bus stops, bus seating, lighting, making it safer and creating a more positive ambience just generally for commuters to want to take the bus, particularly vulnerable users like the elderly, who we heard about earlier from COTA, and also women as well? Your submission does specifically actually touch on some local pockets in my area around Bakers Road, Sydney Road and Nicholson Street as well in some other contexts, but notwithstanding that, I am just keen to hear more about your view and Friends of the Earth's view on these matters.

Elyse CUNNINGHAM: When it comes to zero-emission buses, we would just like to see them rolled out as fast as possible and for them to be prioritised in areas like the growing outer suburbs—the outer western suburbs. But also I think when it comes to emissions reduction, while zero-emission buses will play a role in that, the key thing that is going to massively reduce emissions is enabling that mode shift. Getting people out of their cars and onto public transport is the key element to emission reduction, and that was found in the Climate Council's *Shifting Gear* report. When it comes to your second question—sorry, would you just repeat elements of that?

Anthony CIANFLONE: Sorry, what are the priorities around improving the infrastructure around bus stops, seating, lighting to improve safety and encourage people to want to take the bus more often and just improve that ambience and experience of catching a bus?

Elyse CUNNINGHAM: Yes, thank you. Thanks for repeating that.

Anthony CIANFLONE: That is all right. No worries.

Elyse CUNNINGHAM: I think in the planning processes of bus network reform, active transport infrastructure needs to be sort of integrated into that planning and be seen not only as a mode of transport for people to move locally around their communities but also to connect them to public transport. So I think it is about integrating and taking that holistic view on the entire public transport network. And I think, you know, when it comes to women, people of colour or people who are probably experiencing the highest level of safety concern when they are using active and public transport, it is just adequately consulting and communicating with those communities. And I think a really important element of that as well that has been raised to me a few times by people living out in the western suburbs is ensuring that information around transport is available in multiple languages and making sure that, you know, particular work is done to communicate with people, especially in the outer west, who largely speak languages other than English.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I have a question about whether you have seen a model that really is, I suppose, best practice in terms of having bike riders and public transport come together—you know, if I am not close to a bus stop or if I am jumping on a bike to get to a certain point to then use a bus. Have you seen an example of where biking and public transport is really done well?

Elyse CUNNINGHAM: I have not seen—

The CHAIR: The connectivity.

Elyse CUNNINGHAM: I mean, I think the example that is coming to my mind is pretty simple, like tangible changes to train stations like having places where people can park their bikes at train stations and I guess at bus interchanges as well. But trains are the only mode of public transport where people can take their bikes on. I have seen a few buses around with the things on the front where you can put your bike, but I have also heard stories that that is not something that people feel they can actually utilise because of the way that bus drivers are dealing with really strict timetabling arrangements at the moment. There are a lot of issues around bus drivers not stopping to pick up people with prams or people who are in wheelchairs, and certainly I think the same would apply to people with bicycles. So it is, like, very much a sort of system-wide issue that kind of shows up in a lot of different ways. I hope that answers the question.

The CHAIR: Yes, thank you. Thanks for that. Further question, Dylan?

Dylan WIGHT: Yes, sure. Elyse, I understand that a lot of the work you do is around buses and public transport, but fundamentally, getting people out of their cars is fantastic for emission reduction, as you said. I am just wondering if you have got a view on how the Victorian Government can improve pedestrian crossings to make them safer for people walking.

Elyse CUNNINGHAM: Yes. I think a couple of things—the obvious one of making sure that pedestrian crossings are as close as possible to public transport stops, but another thing I have heard from just speaking with members of the community within the campaign is the implementation of accessible tram stops, because they sort of serve a dual purpose. They enhance accessibility within the transport network. We know that there were the disability standards for accessible public transport requiring all Melbourne’s tram stops to be accessible by 2022, yet I think about only 15% of the network is currently entirely accessible. But raised accessible tram stops just inevitably slow traffic anyway and reduce the need for ground-level crossings.

Dylan WIGHT: Cool. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Elyse, so much for your time, your submission and for taking our questions today. It is much appreciated.

Witness withdrew.