

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Wednesday, 11 August 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

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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 Gerard Mansour, Commissioner for Senior Victorians.

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

I wish to begin by acknowledging 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. I am Chair of the committee, and I would like to introduce my fellow members of the committee that are present with us here today: Mr Rod Barton, Mr Lee Tarlamis, Mr Tim Quilty and Mrs Beverley McArthur.

To witnesses appearing before the hearing: all evidence 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 the hearing is protected by the 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, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and put on the committee website.

We welcome your opening comments but ask they be kept to a maximum of 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion and questions from the committee. Could you please begin by stating your name and then start your presentation. Over to you, Gerard.

Mr MANSOUR: Thank you. Gerard Mansour, Commissioner for Senior Victorians, and thank you for the opportunity to make a presentation on behalf of my constituent group, which are people aged 60 and over.

I thought I would just quickly touch on my role as commissioner. It is very much an advisory and advocacy role on behalf of senior Victorians. It came as a result of an earlier parliamentary inquiry looking at the social participation of older people, and one of the things that people commented on then and that I still find in the role that I have today is a sense that sometimes as people get older the issues that affect them are not necessarily the focus of key decision-makers. So I play a really important advocacy role. At the end of 2016 my role was also broadened as a result of the government's response to the family violence royal commission to also take on a role as Ambassador for Elder Abuse Prevention, and so I have a key role in that role as well.

I thought I would just pick out a few key points of my submission and use that as part of an opening address. An important part of the context for my submission was a report that Minister Luke Donnellan, the Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers, launched in November last year, my report *Ageing Well in a Changing World*. One of the key quotes in that report is:

One of the most important benefits of the ageing of our population is the increasing number of people who can retain high levels of wellbeing, activity and independence well into their 80s and beyond. This has enormous potential to increase social and economic capital, as well as enhance individual wellbeing and quality of life.

One of the things that stood out to me from my report that I think is very relevant to this inquiry is that on the positive side, with the growth of the demographic of older people, we are going to move from, say, 2016, when about one-fifth of our population was aged over 60, to a quarter of our population that will be aged over 60 in 2056. But of course that is more pronounced in rural communities. There is no doubt when you look at the fabric of rural communities, there is a higher proportion, and so the midpoint in that—so in 2036—the ratio of people aged over 60 in greater Melbourne was a bit over 20 per cent, where it is a bit over 30 per cent in rural Victoria. So in that context I was keen to present to the committee some of the issues that impact on the quality of life for older people that are very relevant to consideration of mobility and use of school buses. One of those critical attributes, the values that people hold dearly, is what we refer to as 'ageing in place', and one of the quotes that I would like to bring to your attention is that one of the most deeply held desires of older people is to remain in their homes and in their community for as long as possible as they age. The survey data and other evidence of older people's housing decisions unambiguously reveal that the majority of older people prefer to

age in place. This does not necessarily mean never leaving the family home. Although housing mobility does decline with old age, for many older people the rubber band attaching them to the family home is the desire to remain in the local community.

In my consultations with older people when I prepared for my report *Ageing Well in a Changing World*—and I would just like to note that we had nearly 5000 responses to the online survey, which is one of the highest levels of response for a survey of this kind anywhere in Australia—I had deep-dive conversations with older people from 27 municipalities across Victoria. In the conclusion of my report, in my five priority action areas, one of the concluding notes is that ability to age well:

... includes increasing the availability of ... community transport options to improve accessibility for older people to attend to necessities such as shopping, doctor appointments and chemist visits and to participate in local activities.

And of course we know in many rural communities they do not have the same access to transport options that exist in the Melbourne metropolitan area. One of the particular challenges facing older people is reduced mobility, and that has sort of two parts. One is the personal side of what happens as we age and whether we can move in the same way, but mobility is also very much attached to the ability to move around rural and regional areas. It is very common for older people to want to move to different parts of a town, for example, to do shopping or go to the library, or maybe move to more of a regional centre in accessing health or hospital or specialist services.

One of the other critical issues of my report and one of the negative consequences of low levels of mobility is the increasing impact of isolation and loneliness of older people, and part of my role is looking for any opportunity to address some of the drivers and impacts of isolation and loneliness, and of course one of those for people in rural communities is the issue of transport and mobility around the community.

So just in conclusion, with my report I sort of identified what I think were two options of school buses and the use of school buses. One is more the spare seats option. As a bus is on its particular route I have no doubt that in many communities there would be people aged over 60 who would like to take the opportunity to get onto the bus and travel to a destination or a vicinity close to the proximity of where they are wanting to go. There is also a broader use possibility, which I have called in my report the use of downtime—that there may be opportunities where the bus is laying idle during the day. I know there are cost issues that would have to be considered, but there would be an enormous opportunity to consider how that downtime could be used to broaden the possibility of providing community transport. So in my submission I was opening up both of those options to obviously use of spare bus seats but also to looking at that broader, wider issue of the importance of community transport for rural communities and what that downtime might be able to provide. Thanks very much, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Gerard. And thank you—I know the advocacy you are doing in your role as Commissioner for Senior Victorians is so vital, and there is a big issue of disadvantage in terms of transport as well, so I really appreciate your submission and your presentation so far. I might pass on to committee members to ask questions. I might start off with Mr Barton, then Mr Quilty, then Mr Tarlamis, in that order. We will start with Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Gerard. A really good submission and really hitting all those issues that I am concerned about as well. As a senior Victorian and someone who comes from regional Victoria—rural Victoria in fact—our ability to move around is very challenging, extremely challenging. I just wonder how you think this could possibly work, because it cannot be just walk-ups. What we are suggesting is that it should be pre booked—and, you know, we can talk about websites, we can talk about apps and that sort of thing. For your demographic of people that you look after, how would you think that would work for them?

Mr MANSOUR: Look, I think that is the practical side, isn't it? But I think people would be very used to that. It is very common. I think about a lot of the things that older people do, and it might be points where they have a particular activity group that they are going to, or a plan to do shopping on a particular day, or making a medical appointment, or visiting the library to use the computer or get some assistance to use Zoom and things like that to connect with friends or loved ones interstate or in other parts of Victoria. Having a planned approach would definitely be a positive for them. To know that they could actually book a spot on the bus and then have certainty that they would travel would be far more appealing than standing on a bus stop and hoping that they could get on.

Just where I live I am actually extremely fortunate that I have a bus stop right out the front of my house, but over the road I have got a school. Sometimes I cannot get on my bus and I have to wait for the next one. That is just a public bus situation. So the certainty that people would book would be seen as a positive, not a negative, from an older person's perspective.

Mr BARTON: For the older people, are there any concerns that you can see by opening up spots from a security point of view or anything along those sorts of lines? Do you have any thoughts around that?

Mr MANSOUR: Look, I see it more the other way. I think that in my discussions with older people—and I spend a lot of time out in the community; a little bit less so and a bit differently at the moment with the limitations on travel, but a really important part of my role is to travel into regional and rural Victoria, and I do that very, very regularly—there is an enormous interest of older people in two types of social participation and interaction, and that is both with people of similar age groups but also across the generations. There is enormous interest in intergenerational programs of older people. For those of you, say, that saw the ABC story around aged-care homes for four-year-olds, you would have seen the inspiration and the bounce that came into people's lives. So I think that is how older people would see it: that here is a great opportunity. They would love the ability to interact. For many people that, say, live in a rural community that do not have an enormous amount of opportunity to connect and have social interaction, the fact that they could be on a bus and have a chat—

Many of them would be known, wouldn't they? Like, in a rural community many of the people on the bus would be known to an older person, and so again when I look at it I can see real positives from an older person's perspective that would underpin any journey, because it would bring interaction of itself.

Mr BARTON: Yes. Certainly one of the areas I am really concerned about, and particularly in rural and regional Victoria, is social isolation. This happens in metropolitan Melbourne, but it is exacerbated once you get outside the tram tracks. I have got no more questions, Chair. But thank you, Gerard.

Mr MANSOUR: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Barton. I might pass over to Mr Quilty.

Mr QUILTY: Basically we have heard that the school buses are not fitted out at all for mobility access or anything else. Isn't that going to be a significant problem with pick-up for seniors?

Mr MANSOUR: For some it would. There is no doubt that with bus travel for some people, even where there are mobility areas, there are a number of people that would choose not to go on a bus because of their mobility challenges. So yes, I think there would be a lot of self-selection that would occur. There is enormous diversity in the population of people aged over 60, just like the rest of the community. So I have a chance to meet people in their 90s that are more fit and able than I am, and I meet people in their 60s that have significant disabilities and could not get on a bus. So I do not think it is just an age-related thing, but yes, there certainly would be people for whom bus transport would not be a sensible transport option.

Mr QUILTY: If the government entered into a gradual program of fitting out buses to provide more mobility access over time, would that improve things, do you think, or would people get upset that it was not available straightaway?

Mr MANSOUR: There is probably again a couple of ways to look at it. I think that there are lots of older people that would be able to use a bus simply by opening up an existing bus route in a different way. I think that there would be a substantial number of older people who would be well enough to do that, but there is always going to be the need for more specialised transport options—absolutely. So if this led to the ability to retrofit some buses with other aids that would assist people with mobility challenges—noting that again I just notice in my own community that also happens for young people, doesn't it? There are a number of young people that have mobility challenges, so to provide those so they would also be available to an older person if a young person was not needing them on the bus would certainly be a positive.

Mr QUILTY: Okay. We talked about using technology to book the buses. Is that going to be an issue for some older people who do not have access to the technology and also in rural areas where we have no signal coverage and so on? Can you see issues there?

Mr MANSOUR: Look, technology is a real challenge. I think that I see technology as a bit of a continuum. We have a group of older people who are very good at technology and who have used it through their working life, and so to adapt and use things like the apps we have now to check in to locations would pose no fear for them. There is a significant number of people who I think have a great interest in better using technology but want training support. I note over the last year there have been a lot of councils and neighbourhood houses and others that have run programs to help improve older people's technology, and they have been enormously well received. There are a lot of older people—it could be fear. They have got a really basic understanding of using, say, technology on a phone but transferring that to other things has been a challenge. So I think there is enormous interest by many older people to learn more, but of course there are a group of older people that need options—and alternate options. So I think if there was a booking system, if there was something like an app-type approach, the ability for some people to make a telephone call and do a booking in a manual way would also be an important option for a number of older people.

Mr QUILTY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Tarlamis.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Gerard, for your presentation and submission. My line of questioning has already been asked, so I do not have any additional questions at this point.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Mr Barton, do you have any additional questions?

Mr BARTON: I do, Chair. It is slightly off tangent—because you know I do that. Gerard, I just want to talk about what Mr Quilty raised about wheelchair access and people travelling in those. I was quickly going back over your submission, but I think you mentioned somewhere about wheelchair-access vehicles. Did you mention that in yours?

Mr MANSOUR: Yes. In my view this is a really important inquiry, but it is a subset of a bigger issue about community transport more widely. So I wanted to canvass that as well to bring to the committee's attention that buses and school buses could be an enormous option, particularly if it is infrastructure that sits idle during the day. That really interested me in terms of policy and an effective use of economic resources. But I also wanted to remind the committee that transport for older people is a really complex issue and the broader challenges of community transport in rural areas and wheelchair access. We have got other devices—it is very common to see older people using walker frames—so those sort of issues, just to have those there front and centre for the committee as an opportunity to look at the broader issues around transport for local communities. And obviously that is not just older people. There are people with disabilities and people of all age groups who would confront those challenges, but I think proportionately they are more likely to occur for people aged over 60 as well.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Gerard. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Many of the questions I was going to ask were covered, obviously, in your submission and also in some of the questions asked by my colleagues, so I do not have anything further to add except to say I appreciate your input and your advocacy in this space.

We have a number of other inquiries that might interest you. I could see where Mr Barton was going—we are having an inquiry into multipurpose taxis, and there is obviously another issue of access. I am sure a lot of senior Victorians probably fall into the category where they get access to that program and utilise that program. So that may be another inquiry you would be interested in, and we will make sure that we reach out to you.

On that point I do not have anything further to add. On behalf of the committee I wish to say thank you for your work and advocacy and your presentation and submission. It has been fantastic to have you at today's public hearing.

Mr MANSOUR: Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you, everybody.

Witness withdrew.