

# 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

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Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

Ms Harriet Shing

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

Ms Sheena Watt

**WITNESSES** (*via videoconference*)

Mr Lyndon Stevenson, Chairperson, and

Ms Suzanne Phoenix, Executive Officer, VICTAS Community Transport Association.

**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 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 Tim Quilty, Mr Rod Barton, Mr Lee Tarlamis and Mrs Beverley McArthur.

To witnesses appearing: 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 this 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 website.

We welcome opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion and questions. For the benefit of Hansard, could you please state your names and then begin your presentation. Over to you.

**Mr STEVENSON:** Thank you. My name is Lyndon Stevenson. I am the Chair of the VTCTA, which is the peak body for community transport in Victoria. I would like to start by also acknowledging the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we meet here today and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I would like to also introduce Suzanne Phoenix, who is the Executive Officer of the VTCTA.

I thank the Legislative Council Economic and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into the Use of School Buses in Rural and Regional Victoria for receiving our submission and for the invitation to present today. I will start by providing a very brief overview of community transport as a sector nationally, and then I will drill quickly down to Victoria and hand over to Suzanne to talk more locally about our submission.

The VTCTA, the peak body for Victorian community transport, is part of a national peak body, which is the Australian Community Transport Association. The sector supports over a quarter of a million consumers and delivers 5½ million trips per year around the country. It sits within the healthcare industry. It could fit within many others, such as transport, for example.

The consumer profile—most passengers or consumers of community transport are older people and people with a disability. It provides obviously transport support that is either permanent, to enable people to live independently—so that would be social-type transport—or time-based transport, such as re-ablement, to help people recover from an incident or injury, otherwise described as non-emergency medical and social transport. The sector provides really the aspirations to support people to live independently in their homes. The consumer profile is reflective of about 80 per cent of consumers being older people, and this part of the sector is funded from the commonwealth through the commonwealth home support program. State-based funding also supports younger people with a disability or a condition preventing them from undertaking daily tasks. Again, this is typically funded from state governments.

Providers are typically not for profit and range in turnover from a few hundred thousand to \$10 million per annum. The sector engages over 8000 volunteers and engages around 2000 paid staff. Nationally the sector is around \$200 million, with the majority of that funding coming, again, from the federal government Department of Health through the commonwealth home support program, and it is estimated that around \$20 million comes from state governments around the country as well. Victoria receives much less CHSP funding than other

states. As an example, South Australia receives around double the amount Victoria receives. State-based funding also appears much lower, although that is difficult to ascertain given that in Victoria particularly community transport is not necessarily recognised as a sector. It is more volunteer support or a range of other sectors, and that is of course where the funding comes through—again, such as volunteer support.

I will now hand over to Suzanne, who will talk a little bit more about the peak body in Victoria, our members and our submission. Thanks, Suzanne.

**Ms PHOENIX:** My name is Suzanne Phoenix. I am the Executive Officer of VICTAS Community Transport Association. Thank you, Lyndon, for the sector overview. VTCTA appreciates the opportunity to be part of this public hearing greatly. In Victoria community transport has been delivering flexible rural and regional transport for over 45 years, enabling older people and people with a disability to maintain their independence, quality of life and connection to their communities. VICTAS Community Transport Association, or VTCTA, is the peak body for Victoria representing community transport providers across the state including in rural, regional and metropolitan Victoria.

Our key strategic goals are advocacy, sector capacity building and sustainability of the sector. We currently have 50 members comprising small or large not-for-profit organisations, from those servicing their local communities and areas to national organisations, with about a third of the membership being local governments. With Victoria receiving less commonwealth home support program funding than other states, this prohibits our sector's ability and capacity to support, scale up and better service people in rural and regional Victoria compared to other states like South Australia and Tasmania, which are able to.

VTCTA's submission is based on collaborative consultation with both VCOSS and COTA Vic to have the perspectives of the community transport sector included in all three submissions, where the interests of older people, people with disabilities and those who are transport disadvantaged align. VTCTA supports item (1) of the terms of reference—to undertake a place-based independent analysis of transport disadvantage to assess the financial, social and economic impacts for rural and regional Victorians. VTCTA recommends a process to identify and fund place-based transport strategies that address transport disadvantage in local communities. VTCTA recommends that roles and responsibilities for state government departments and local government for transport planning and coordination and funding are clarified. And our final recommendation is that we advocate to have the role of community transport recognised and adequately funded—adequately block funded—to enable providers to service regional and rural communities. We believe that all people should have access to safe, reliable, accessible and affordable transport. Thank you for the opportunity to submit and speak on this important strategy that impacts those who are frail aged, have a disability and/or are transport disadvantaged. We welcome the opportunity to answer your questions and discuss further.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you both for your opening remarks and for your submission to the inquiry. I would like to start by giving committee members an opportunity to ask questions—Mr Barton, Mr Quilty and Mr Tarlamis, in that order. Mr Barton, would you like to ask the first few questions?

**Mr BARTON:** Thank you. Thank you, Lyndon and Suzanne, for coming in. Much appreciated. If the government opened up and made more seats available across the—I think it is about 1600—bus services, would that have a negative effect on your operations?

**Mr STEVENSON:** Suzanne, if you like, I will answer that one. Look, thanks very much for the question. Yes and no I think the answer is. I guess a lot of our consumers that we service as a sector do have trouble accessing standard, normal buses, due to their complex access needs, and that could be through disability or frailty, and typically the sector is door to door, so it can go to a consumer's home to collect them and drop them at the door, so it does take care of that first and last mile issue. That said, there are definitely consumers in regional areas across Victoria that would benefit, those that are more able, able to access your standard bus transport.

**Mr BARTON:** We have got one of these situations where there is an overlapping, and the Chair is looking at me and I know he knows I am going to go down a track. Yes, so, look, you are not going to get a stronger supporter of wheelchair-access vehicles in rural and regional Victoria that I am. It is something for which we have been fighting ever since I came into Parliament, to protect those. But there are also the other issues about maintaining those services. I do not think it is commercially feasible or viable to convert buses to take

wheelchair customers. I think that is a specialised service and I think that is a specialised service which is run by the taxi industry. Can we do better? Of course we can do better. Must we do better? Yes, we must do better.

But we have also known—I will just say this as slightly off topic here, in terms of community services, and I will not say the town because I got into trouble mentioning it once before—that we have got so many volunteers now, working out of a particular hospital down on the west coast in Mrs McArthur's electorate where the local taxi service has been competing against volunteers out of the hospital. They have now parked their wheelchair vehicle—it must be about 18 months or two years ago—and they have not replaced it. Now, that community have now lost their wheelchair vehicle. So there is a balance to make sure that we keep the wheelchairs being able to financially operate and there is also the other operation. Obviously we cannot survive without the volunteers.

But what I really want to talk about is the impact. I understand the unintended consequences if we opened up the school buses in terms of the volunteer network and all that sort of thing, but is there anything adverse? I think I have asked this previously. Can I put it another way: can you see that there is anything that is going to impact you in a negative way?

**Mr STEVENSON:** Suzanne, please, if you would like to add to my response, please do—if that is okay, through the Chair. I do not think so because I think the sector in Victoria particularly is screaming out for additional resources. There are providers coming to the peak body explaining to us that there are lots of people in regional parts of Victoria that do not have access now, and the sector does not have the capacity through the funding challenges to be negatively impacted. I think our proposition is that as a sector we are a very highly, highly skilled sector with heaps of experience that has specialty in wheelchair and, again, transport for people with disabilities, with frailties and other complex access needs, doing a very low-cost, high-quality service. I think our proposition is with increased scale capacity, then we could solve some of those problems. So to answer the question, our issue is actually not, I guess, being challenged in the market. Our issue is actually trying to get into the market to solve some of those problems.

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

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for that. I might pass over to Mr Quilty, then Mr Tarlamis.

**Mr QUILTY:** There are kind of two prongs to this inquiry. We are looking at using spare capacity on school buses while they are doing their runs but also looking at using school buses during the day between school runs. So if we were going to use school buses during the day, how would we be setting the routes for the buses? Do you have ideas of how we could use technology to pick up. Would we actually have buses going off routes to pick up and deliver, or how would you see that working?

**Mr STEVENSON:** Suzanne, would you like me to answer that one, or are you happy to—?

**Ms PHOENIX:** If you are happy to start.

**Mr STEVENSON:** Look, thanks for the question. So the first part of the question I understood to be, you know, where would you route these services and where is the demand, I guess? That is a very good question. I guess it depends on the type of transport that is required. Often in the sector, as with school buses, as with other types of services, there is a lot of surge morning and afternoon, which is a challenge. I guess, look, the sector again is quite sophisticated. If it was able to scale up, we have really strong IT systems. We are able to understand where the demand is coming from. Obviously once we deliver services, we have the records of the historical demand and the supply capabilities. So at this stage the sector does and the drivers do have some knowledge. I do not have that with me today, but the sector does have knowledge of where there are some demand issues that could play a role in supporting that answer.

**Ms PHOENIX:** Can I just respond also. I think it comes back to in order to set the routes, we need to understand the entire situation across the state. We know there is unmet need there but the scale of it, and that detail I do not believe we have as a state. So we keep looking at solutions, but we do not have all understanding of what the breadth of that issue is.

**Mr QUILTY:** Okay, thanks. I will pass on.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks for that, Mr Quilty. I might pass on to Mr Tarlamis to ask a couple of questions.

**Mr TARLAMIS:** Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Suzanne, and thank you, Lyndon. I just want to pick up on that point that Suzanne made. Part of the issue, I think, that you touch on is that line of sight about how any changes would impact on different areas, because it would not necessarily be a one size fits all. What may work in one area may not work in another area, and different regional and rural areas would be impacted in different ways, so you would need to make sure that any system that you put in place would work wherever it was being rolled out. You know, there would be areas where there would be demand and other areas where there would not be demand, and so on and so forth. And I think that is the point you touched on about trying to identify what demand there is and those sorts of things. Did I capture that correctly or accurately?

**Ms PHOENIX:** Yes. I believe so. Yes.

**Mr TARLAMIS:** Are there any other particular issues or concerns that you could highlight or would have with opening up the system for the school bus network to the public that you might want to identify today for members of the committee?

**Mr STEVENSON:** Suzanne, if I may, I might respond initially. Classically where community transport comes into its own in regional areas is the small number of complex access needs of consumers, typically dirt roads, small driveways, long distances to get to the front gate. This is where community transport does come into its own. The sector has minibuses, small buses, sedans, all types of vehicles to cater for all types of access needs, and quite practically some sedans are higher off the ground than other sedans, and that can make the difference between someone that can actually get transport or not. So I think that there would definitely be unmet demand, because there would be consumers that would still not be able to access transport.

**Mr TARLAMIS:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Mrs McArthur, did you have a question for our witnesses?

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Look, thank you, Chair, and my apologies for not being on deck all the time this morning. I am trying to traverse two public inquiries. This may be not in your bailiwick, Suzanne or Lyndon, so please disregard it if that is the case. I have an issue in relation to disability transport, and disability transport that moves schoolchildren with a disability to a school specifically for disabled students, or whatever of the proper name is. There seems to be some discretion allowed by a principal as to whether students can get on the transport to get from their home to the school. Is that something that comes into your parameter or not?

**Ms PHOENIX:** Can I just clarify: are you talking about transport that is community transport or the school bus system?

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Yes, I think it probably does not come into your area, because it is the school bus system that has specific school buses for students with a disability to take them to a special school. So that is probably outside your area of activity, I am gathering.

**Ms PHOENIX:** It is, but I would just say that the community sector does provide a lot of transport for children with disabilities, taking them from respite to school as well. So they do feed in, but as far as that circumstance you are talking about goes, I do not think that is within our scope, yes.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you. I am sorry to inflict it upon you. I will find another witness that might be able to help us out.

**The CHAIR:** No, but I appreciate—

**Mrs McARTHUR:** But the Chair might be able to find a witness. He is very skilled.

**The CHAIR:** No, that is right. Lyndon and Suzanne, I found it very interesting—many of the issues that you touched on. You said that similar networks operate—to your operations—in South Australia and Tasmania. Is that right?

**Mr STEVENSON:** That is right, yes. Look, across the country I guess this sector is much more sophisticated than in Victoria, and that is potentially largely due to the transition of the program from the state

government across to the federal government around 2012, with the change in how aged care was being managed and funded—where it was from the state and now it is from the federal government—and it was a transitioning of essentially level of service and level of funding across to the federal government. And it appears that the understanding of the level of community transport in Victoria was not as well recognised in other states.

**The CHAIR:** So you are saying that historically, and also with the regulation of the funding stream, you are more reliant on federal government for all your services. How many services do you deliver, if I may ask? Could you disclose that?

**Mr STEVENSON:** Look, the level of number—I do not have that just in front of me at the moment, I am sorry.

**The CHAIR:** Could we get that on notice? I am just curious to, say, know the size of the service you provide. Like, you do not have to give exact numbers but just a broad, ballpark approximation. It is just good to get an idea. I do like just comparing what is happening in our jurisdiction with others. I think that is always helpful.

**Mr STEVENSON:** Yes. Look, specifically for the commonwealth home support part of the program, so supporting people that are over 65 or over 50 for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cohort, it is around 250 000 trips per annum in Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** That is quite a large service, to put it into perspective. That is quite considerable. Yes, I was not sure of the scope, but that was another thing. But I just wanted to thank you for your submission. I found it helpful, and some of the questions that I had have been teased out already. I know one of the committee members also flagged we have an ongoing inquiry into the multipurpose taxi scheme. You might want to have a look at that. We would obviously invite you to make a submission to that inquiry also if you could, because obviously your specialty is in dealing with people's frailties or disabilities and that input would definitely be helpful to the committee in its work and deliberations.

In relation to this ongoing inquiry, I do not have any further questions. Do any of the other members have any additional questions? Mr Quilty, Mr Barton, Mr Tarlamis, any additional questions?

**Mr BARTON:** No. I am good, thank you.

**The CHAIR:** I am too. I think most of the issues were covered in the submission and the presentations today. On behalf of the committee I wish to thank both of you. I know you are both very busy, and to take time out of your day to appear before the hearing is greatly appreciated. Thank you on behalf of the committee.

**Mr STEVENSON:** On behalf of the peak body and its members, we thank you very much too for the inquiry and the opportunity to present today, and for the questions. Thank you very much.

**Ms PHOENIX:** Thank you, Chair.

**Witnesses withdrew.**