

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Tuesday, 27 July 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 Graeme Sandlant.

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 any background noise is minimised.

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and 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 also like to introduce my fellow committee members that are present with us here today: Mr Rodney Barton, Mr Mark Gepp, Mrs Bev McArthur, Mr Tim Quilty and Mr Lee Tarlamis.

To all witnesses appearing: all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act* 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. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

We welcome your opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to ensure we have plenty of time for discussion. Could you please begin by stating your name for the benefit of the Hansard team and then start your presentation. Over to you.

Mr SANDLANT: My name is Graeme Sandlant. I have been a bus operator-service provider now for over 50 years. My submission focuses on two issues: one is the student safe travel environment ongoing and, two, introducing services to isolated public passenger transport deprived communities.

The school bus system is a great investment in rural and regional decentralisation. It should be recognised that the existing school bus system has stood the test of time because it has been dedicated primarily to rural students' education opportunities. The school bus system continues to this day to play a valuable role to enable isolated country students to get their higher education by accessing the Victorian country school bus system. There is no doubt that without a dedicated school bus system country kids would never have had the opportunity to gain education standards comparable with the city-educated kids, which would have led to a them-and-us society existing in Victoria today.

These days with local primary schools closing down we are finding an increasing number of young rural primary students using the school bus system to get to their primary education in larger centres. Therefore the school bus system must retain its primary duty to provide access to education opportunities in a safe environment. School bus contractors and school bus drivers provide a duty of care to parents for their kids' safe travel to and from their home and school. The contractors and drivers are challenged to comply with Transport Safety Victoria compliance and the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005*, which requires zero tolerance for any form of discrimination or child abuse, including grooming, which could be compromised if the school bus system is to be opened up to mainstream travellers.

The school bus system continues to be an enormous support to rural and regional decentralisation. Government introduced the rural and regional country school bus system after World War II to encourage soldiers returning from the war to take up family farming areas, which effectively achieved early decentralisation. Farming plays an enormous support to the national economy, and it would prove to be non-productive if rural farming communities lose respect for a school bus system that has been compromised by not having safe and reliable transport to education opportunities for their family.

I now address the rural and regional mainstream public passenger services. Those of us living in rural and regional Victoria know from experience that there are genuinely isolated, elderly, low-income households and youth who are disadvantaged, with no public passenger transport available. There is no doubt that in a civilised society the disadvantaged have a right to have public passenger transport services where services will be used. It can be confirmed that there are other, more practical ways to provide mainstream traffic services than through the school bus system. One size does not fit all.

There are 1500 school buses operating in Victoria, and under a proposal to utilise the school bus system's spare seats for the mainstream public it should be recognised that the transport disadvantaged would only have access for shopping, medical, social interaction et cetera for some 80 per cent of the year due to the school buses not operating through school holiday periods. Not every transport-disadvantaged person, especially the elderly, will want to leave home around 7.30 am and stand over in town from 8.30 to 3.15 and not return to their home until around 5.00 pm. These times are not ideal, especially for the elderly or those who may have to travel some distance on foot to reach the pick-up/drop-off point. I believe there needs to be a demand/cost-of-supply service survey to evaluate what the effect will be on the existing DOT, V/Line and non-subsidised route contract networks that are already operating, as there is every likelihood that the school bus system, if allowed to carry mainstream passengers, will compete with regular services and thereby put at risk the existing essential public passenger transport services being operated in country Victoria.

The challenge to provide new rural and regional mainstream public passenger services to those who need public passenger transport has often been put in the too-hard basket. However, this review gives opportunity to meet the challenge, to improve mainstream service provision to isolated areas whilst leaving the country school bus system alone. One practical option would be to provide Department of Transport public passenger route-type services to areas where demand is required, similar to the regional development network plan 2013 that was introduced to get people where they need to go.

Cross-subsidisation enablers, such as using the DET school buses and drivers through a Department of Transport supplementary contract to operate a once-weekly, or more often if needed, Department of Transport route-style service timetable between the am and pm school bus services to travel out, pick up mainstream traffic and return to town early mid-morning, then after lunch return mainstream traffic home in time for bus and driver to get back into town for the pm school bus service—to utilise Department of Transport route service management procedures in partnership with the local school bus operator and thereby achieve controlled operating costs with no administration costs and, most importantly, keep safe travel the primary objective to enable primary and secondary students to obtain their education.

A small number of transport-deprived areas throughout the state will be found to not have sufficient demand to justify a weekly, regular passenger route service. These areas should not be forgotten. Those isolated from public passenger transport could be provided for on a case-by-case need basis by beefing up the local government community car program. The rationale behind the school contract service and separate Department of Transport supplementary service for mainstream public is to continue to provide a separation of service that protects the integrity of school student transfers and allows youth, elderly, low-income households and any other general public to travel in the same manner as other route services in country Victoria. Thank you, Mr Chairman.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Sandlant, for your presentation. That was quite informative. What I might do is go around the committee and give committee members an opportunity to ask questions or discuss points of view. I might start off with Mr Quilty, then Mr Barton. Mr Quilty, would you like to go first?

Mr QUILTY: Thanks. All right. Could you give the committee a bit of an overview about how contracts for regional bus routes work? Who gives them out? How are they managed? Do they hire the bus all day, or is it just for the hour periods and so on?

Mr SANDLANT: You are talking about the route-type system, not the school system?

Mr QUILTY: Yes, or school buses.

Mr SANDLANT: In cities and towns, major centres, the Department of Transport contract out buses to operators. There are some private operators that have licences to operate to some regional areas. The school bus system of course is not authorised to carry general traffic, although there is some traffic permitted to travel on it.

Mr QUILTY: Could you go into a bit more detail about how the contracts work and how the buses are engaged, and also with the rural routes, if you know about the actual bus routes themselves? Assume I know nothing about it and tell me things I need to know.

Mr SANDLANT: Well, I am just not clear on exactly what direction you want me to go in, but I operate a number of country services which I am licensed by the Department of Transport to operate, and therefore we target whatever the needs are, whether it is people attending tourism areas like Halls Gap or whatever it may be. That is the way in which we work those services.

Mr QUILTY: All right. That is okay. Now, you talk about operating routes once per week, perhaps to pick up elderly disadvantaged in between school route times. Can you expand a bit more on how that would work and what that would cost to run?

Mr SANDLANT: Well, the cost is of course out of my area, but my understanding would be that you have the school bus and the school driver paid for under the ministry of education contract, so therefore it is standing around through the week. Now, my understanding would be that if you have a need, say, in a small town just down the road that that bus could be programmed to go out and provide a service back in and arrange to go out to take the people home and be back in time for school, like I said in my presentation, there would be a need to establish whether there was a demand in that particular area—what it was and what it was needed for. That service for the community could need to be targeted just to come in shopping or whatever it may be or coordinate with V/Line services passing through an area to give them access to a wider area. There would need to be a lot of consultation at a local level and with the department to identify need in each area. The need would not be the same right throughout the state.

Mr QUILTY: Okay. Thank you. I will pass on.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. I will pass over to Mr Barton to ask a question.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Graeme. Just in terms of the buses where you say that the buses are only used for a certain period of time. I am assuming you actually have other work for the buses outside of the school run—like in the school holidays you do tours or whatever may be. Is that correct? So there is sufficient work to keep your buses working?

Mr SANDLANT: No. The school buses are pretty well targeted to their school contracts.

Mr BARTON: Yes. So is there any opportunity for you, for instance—and I will just say this as an example of an operator in Ballarat. They do their school run, and on that school run they had prebooked older students going to TAFE and university into Ballarat. They do the school run, they drop the kids off at school and then they go off on an extended run and drop the others. Have you got any scope for that?

Mr SANDLANT: Yes. Well, it is not up to the operator to make those decisions. It is—

Mr BARTON: No, no. We are just asking whether you feel there is a commercial viability to do it and whether that would be a viable thing to do.

Mr SANDLANT: Yes. Well, my suggestion is that it would need to be subcontracted to the Department of Transport. It would not be on the individual operator to fund the service.

Mr BARTON: Yes. All right. I will just say one thing to you just so it is clear: there is no plan to change the school bus service—none. What is being suggested is that if you have capacity, people could prebook. Now, how that all happens is yet to be determined, but if there is capacity on some of your buses, if there is like half a dozen seats available every day, Granny could contact your service and say, ‘Listen, I need to go to the doctors tomorrow. Can I book to come on board?’ and go along like that. You do not think that is a viable option?

Mr SANDLANT: Yes, it is a viable option, but it is not a safe option. That is my whole argument: who is going to be responsible for the person who gets on the bus to travel with our students?

Mr BARTON: Yes. Okay. If we had, say, particular schools and they have a monitor, like one of the parents or a couple of the parents, just on the school runs—they are on there and they have had their working

with children checks—would that allay some of your fears? Because you would have cameras inside your school buses anyway, wouldn't you?

Mr SANDLANT: No, we do not.

Mr BARTON: Oh, you do not?

Mr SANDLANT: No.

Mr BARTON: Okay. There are other issues about older kids bullying younger kids and all those sorts of things of course.

Mr SANDLANT: Well, we do not have much of that. We are in the country area, and there is just not much of that happening at all. What our main concern is you have got five-year-old kids travelling on the bus and it would be terrible, if they cop a bad experience, for the rest of their life. That is my concern. That is more important to protect the kids—the students—through their education experiences when there are other ways that we can provide services to the isolated areas.

Mr BARTON: So what do you suggest we do? What would be—

Mr SANDLANT: What I would suggest is that if there is a targeted area in a small town beside one of the major towns the school bus, as I said before, could be used to give a service and still retain the school bus services without being involved with the mainstream traffic.

Mr BARTON: Well, that is a possibility. That may end up being one of the recommendations of the committee. Who knows what the committee is going to come up with? What we are saying is that you have got a serious investment in assets and I would assume that you would want to make those assets work the best you can.

Mr SANDLANT: That is right, and it is in our interests to do that, because these school buses are used for the schools in the town, say to the swimming pool or to go to sport in the next town or whatever it may be in school hours. They can be an asset to that. But what we are talking about is the mainstream traffic, not the school use.

Mr BARTON: Yes. Okay. Thank you, Graeme. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much for that, Rod. And thank you, Graeme. I might pass over to Mr Gepp and then Mrs McArthur after that. Mr Gepp.

Mr GEPP: Graeme, thanks so much for being with us today and congratulations to your family on 100 years of private bus service. My late father-in-law also had a small bus company for many, many years, so I know how valuable family-owned bus companies are to their local communities.

Mr SANDLANT: Thank you.

Mr GEPP: I do not think we will have anyone better qualified than you to come before us. Graeme, can I ask: in between school runs, just so that I am clear, what do your buses do—the ones that you contracted specifically for the school runs? Is there other work that you perform between the school bus hours or are your buses idle during those times?

Mr SANDLANT: They are idle unless we have a use for them for schools, as I said before, to move around to swimming pools or whatever it may be. But the majority of the buses would be just sitting in their garage until they are required in the afternoon.

Mr GEPP: Is that your choice or is that a condition of the contract?

Mr SANDLANT: Well, we have a responsibility to operate the contract say till about 9 o'clock. After that, there is no written contract till it goes out again. So it is the operator's choice, what happens within that other period.

Mr GEPP: Okay. So for that 6 hours or so—unless the school has contracted you directly—it would be different to your Department of Transport contract; is that right? So you have got your normal contract for the operation of the school bus, and then if there is any work that you do in between 9 and 3.30 or 9 and 3, or whatever the hours are, that is a direct relationship between you and the school; is that right?

Mr SANDLANT: Yes, that is right. Yes.

Mr GEPP: Okay. So, further to your last comment to Mr Barton, in that time, that 6½-hour window or that 6-hour window—bearing in mind that we are talking about regional and rural communities, so there are always travel times that have to be taken into account—do you see scope for alternative use for your buses, rather than being garaged, to service that need that has been identified which has triggered this inquiry?

Mr SANDLANT: Yes. There would be, yes.

Mr GEPP: Okay. And I guess probably my last question, Chair. You have highlighted, Graeme, the need to protect our kids, and I think we are all at one with that.

Mr SANDLANT: Yes.

Mr GEPP: There is nothing more paramount to everybody in the Parliament than the protection of our kids. So do you say that if we can protect our kids, there is the capacity for us to use the school bus system for others to travel on it, you know, instead of transporting kids, or is it your submission to the committee that that is just a bridge too far and that that hurdle is just too high for us to get over it?

Mr SANDLANT: Certainly the spare seats are available, but I think it is a bridge too far to mishmash the company. The school bus system has been there forever and a day, and it is doing its duty. Kids are coming through without any problem at all—or not without any problem at all, but it is not detrimental to their education or whatever it may be—and to give you an example that I am concerned about, if we were to let a five-year-old child off at a regular stop and you had an adult on the bus that got off at that stop, who is going to be responsible for that type of thing? They are the concerns I have.

Mr GEPP: I understand. Thank you, sir.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much for that, Mark. I might pass over to Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Graeme. Like Mr Gepp has said, congratulations on an extraordinary family business and history of being a bus operator in rural and regional Victoria. You are without equal and beyond par.

Mr SANDLANT: Thank you.

Mrs McARTHUR: Mr Sandlant, would you agree that there is potential injury to children—say, a five-year-old with a 17-year-old, perhaps, who is doing year 12, just as much as maybe somebody else? I mean, you have suggested that in rural Victoria we are all much better behaved than those people in the urban area, but would you agree that there is an opportunity for injury to be caused to younger children by the older children already on the bus?

Mr SANDLANT: Yes, there is certainly opportunity, but I do not think it happens really.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. Right. Well, in that case, I am wondering: would you think there is an opportunity to gradually increase the access to this sort of transport to those students who may have been using the service to go to primary and then secondary school but who now might need to go to some form of tertiary education or might even be just starting an apprenticeship somewhere—maybe in the wonderful Sandlant bus company, for example—to be able to access the school bus system, rather than initially moving to adults, even Grandma?

Mr SANDLANT: Yes. Well, I think that there is plenty of scope there in what you have talked about. There is a need. It can be well controlled because they are a regular type of situation. It is the ad hoc traffic that I am talking about—who knows what their background is or whatever it may be. In my opinion it is too big a risk to put it on school buses.

Mrs McARTHUR: That is a very good point. If we were looking at expanding it to tertiary students or apprenticeship clients, they would be doing it every day, effectively, or most days, so you would be well aware of who they were. They might organise their travel as a school student would, from one term to the next or for one six-monthly period or whatever it might be, so you would have a better understanding of who was getting on on a regular basis.

Mr SANDLANT: Yes, I agree with that; that would be done. So we receive a list of names that are eligible to travel. That would be just an extension of that, and I think it is quite appropriate to do that.

Mrs McARTHUR: Right. So tell me: as part of your contract, when the buses are in their garage, does the education department have to compensate you for that downtime of the buses?

Mr SANDLANT: No.

Mrs McARTHUR: No, so you could use them for other purposes if there was a need somewhere else.

Mr SANDLANT: That is right, yes.

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes. Okay. Do you have any idea of what extra cost or work would be entailed if you were to be engaged in this sort of operation, even just extending it to older students or apprentices, from your point of view?

Mr SANDLANT: I do not think there would be any extra entitlements for an operator if he was to fill those extra seats with apprentices or that type of regular traffic.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. That is positive in itself. And you would be open to having that sort of discussion in your business?

Mr SANDLANT: Definitely.

Mrs McARTHUR: Very good.

Mr SANDLANT: We are there to help the people, and that is justified and well controlled, I would think.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. In your experience, and it is obviously incredibly vast, what is the need for others to access some sort of transport system in some of the routes that you already service? Is there a need? How great is it? How much work would we have to do to ascertain that need?

Mr SANDLANT: Well, you would need your local council to survey and to find out that sort of thing, I would think. It is not an operator responsibility. It would not be a school's responsibility. I think perhaps a local council could target something along those lines.

Mrs McARTHUR: Just in your anecdotal experience, given that it is vast, do you think there is a need? You know, just—

Mr SANDLANT: There certainly is a need. There is certainly a need, but to what extent or how much it would justify utilising a bus for that need—I could not go that far.

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes. We might have to look at one of Mr Barton's limousine services or something.

Mr SANDLANT: That is about it.

Mrs McARTHUR: That might be more cost effective, Mr Barton. All right. Well, look, thank you very much, Graeme. We are greatly appreciative of your time today and your wisdom and experience.

Mr SANDLANT: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that. I do not have a question to ask. If any other committee members have an additional question, feel free to do so now. Yes, Mr Gepp?

Mr GEPP: Yes. Graeme—if I might; thanks, Chair—I do not know whether you hire your buses out on an hourly basis or on a 2-hourly basis. I know you have got your school contracts, but if there was a window in that 9.00 am to 3.00 pm period where someone was to hire one of your garaged school buses for 3 hours, would it be on an hourly basis? Does it depend on the type of job?

Mr SANDLANT: It depends on the type of job, and it depends who your customer is. If it is a school that you are servicing, you naturally take into consideration your responsibility in the community.

Mr GEPP: Yes. So if it was, for example, a modified on-demand service where you might go to a regional or rural town and there is capacity over a 2- or 3-hour window for people to be collected and taken, does it then become more expensive because you have got multiple stops involved?

Mr SANDLANT: Well, the regional development network plan 2013 introduced a lot of these services throughout the state, so I would think that that would be a good starting point. I could not, off the top of my head, give you any advice on costings or that type of thing. The availability is there, but there would need to be work done on it.

Mr GEPP: So if, again, there was a window for some work that could be done with one of these garaged school buses of yours that allowed you to maintain your school contracts, of course, is there a minimum amount of work that you would need before it became commercially viable for you? Say, would it need to be a 2-hour job, would it need to be a 3-hour job or a 4-hour job, or doesn't it matter?

Mr SANDLANT: You treat every one as an individual application. You know, when somebody applies, you just have a look at it and see what you can do for them.

Mr GEPP: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks for that, Mr Gepp. Mr Sandlant, on behalf of the committee I wish to say thank you for sharing your vast experience and knowledge with the committee. It has been very helpful and will assist the committee in its work. Again, I just wish to thank you for your contribution and presentation today.

Mr SANDLANT: Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.