

# 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*)

Professor Carolyn Unsworth, Discipline Lead, Occupational Therapy, School of Health, Federation University.

**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 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, and I am Chair of the committee, and I would like to also introduce my fellow committee members: Mrs Beverley McArthur, Mr Rod Barton, Mr Mark Gepp, Mr Tim Quilty and Mr Lee Tarlamis.

To all witnesses giving evidence, 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 comments 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 put on the committee website.

We welcome your opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to allow plenty of discussion with the committee. Could you please begin by stating your name for the Hansard record and start your presentation. Over to you, Professor Unsworth.

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** Thank you. My name is Carolyn Unsworth. I am Professor of Occupational Therapy at Federation University. My particular expertise and the reason why I am coming today to talk to you is that I conduct research that enables people with a range of disabilities or older people to be able to use public transport, particularly people with mobility limitations that mean they use mobility devices—wheelchairs, mobility scooters and so on. Also, I am an educator at Federation University, and therefore I am also representing the interests of students who need to get to our university campuses, which are located in Ballarat and in the Gippsland town of Churchill—so two different university campuses.

So to begin with I just wanted to mention that I have been reading the Gippsland school bus flexibility service report, which I know that the committee will also have read, and I am very supportive of this particular report, which ran in my region from 2006 to 2009. Many of the principles that came out of that report must be considered by the committee today. In particular there was a point that said that one of the limitations of the study was that the demand for access was neither known nor well documented for this service. I think that here we are some 10 years later still without adequate information on the demand for the service. We do know that regional Victoria is poorly serviced by public transport and that affordable rideshare services, when compared with our metro citizens, certainly place our rural colleagues at a disadvantage. Of course transport disadvantage has a negative downward and spiralling effect for people.

So I just want to briefly touch on two things: firstly, the barriers to the use of school buses for my particular interest groups, which are university students and people with disabilities and older people; and then the advantages if school buses were to become available for these two groups. So in terms of barriers for use for university students, we do not have any identified. We know that university students are young adults; they are aged 16 and over. Usually they are aged 18 and therefore not subject to any of the child safety issues that you must be addressing with other aspects of the inquiry that you are making.

In terms of barriers for people with disabilities and older people, however, it is important to note that school buses are not compliant with the *Disability Discrimination Act* and the DSAPT—that would be the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport. So, for example, school buses do not kneel, they are not low floor and they do not have ramp access, as our public buses do—and all our public buses of course are DSAPT compliant. We also have disadvantages where bus shelters and stops in our regional communities are also not

fit for purpose for older people and people with disabilities to be able to board the buses. So those would be the main disadvantages.

In terms of what the outcomes would be, however, for both groups there would be significant advantages in being able to use the school bus services. So for our university students we know that there are a wide range of potential students in regional areas who do not have any affordable means to get to university campuses such as Federation University. So data from 2016 to 2020 from Federation Uni showed that between 6 and 11 per cent of students who considered discontinuing their program of study cited commuting difficulties as the primary reason.

We have two campuses. We have Ballarat and we have Gippsland campuses. So in Ballarat campus we know that 80 per cent of the students at Federation Uni come from either the Ballarat region or the surrounding regional areas. So even for students living on the outskirts of Ballarat it can take them up to 1.5 hours on two public buses to get to the campus. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that many potential students in the Wimmera also cite the lack of transport as the main reason why they cannot enrol at a university, so therefore they feel significantly disadvantaged by that. The Wimmera livability challenges summary for 2020 shows that only 3 per cent of the combined populations of Hindmarsh, West Wimmera and Yarriambiack report good to very good public transport access as compared to the regional Victorian average of 33 per cent and the state average of 61 per cent who say that they have good access to transport. So that was our Ballarat campus.

If we look at our Gippsland campus, we know that 88 per cent of our students, which is over 2000 students at the Gippsland campus in Churchill, reside in the Latrobe, Wellington, Baw Baw and South Gippsland shires. Many of the students cite that they simply cannot afford to drive to university, fuel is too expensive, and that they do not have access to public buses that will bring them to the university. So that is a significant advantage if those school buses were to be made available for our university students.

Now, if we turn to our older people and people who have a range of disabilities, we know that it would be ideal if buses were fully accessible. But given that the school buses are not, it would still be a significant advantage for many people to be able to access these buses. For example, a young person who might have low vision, they are not going to be able to ever independently drive, and so of course being able to access the school bus would be a significant advantage. Many older people who use walking sticks, four-point frames, they would be able to step up into the bus unassisted. It would appear that an exemption can be sought from VEOHRC so that the school buses do not need to comply with DSAPT requirements, and this is certainly something that I would strongly support. In an ideal world of course all the buses should be fully accessible, but in the interim it would be great to at least get these buses into service for the community.

That brings my comments to a close. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for that, Professor. You touched on a couple of points that previous witnesses have not touched on, so I appreciate the different perspective. I might start off by passing to Mrs McArthur and then go to Mr Tarlamis. Mrs McArthur.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Professor. Do you think it would be a viable cost situation for school buses to be retrofitted to accommodate disability clients?

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** It is a very good question. I think that there would need to be a needs analysis undertaken before retrofitting would be examined. Retrofitting would not be a simple matter at all. Many of the very small buses, which might be 18-footers, are completely inappropriate to retrofit. For the majority of buses I do not think this would be cost-effective at all.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Do you think we could expand the existing school bus routes to accommodate tertiary students for a start, and does it happen at all in Ballarat or Gippsland at the moment? How many do you think would access it?

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** Both are very good questions. I do not have any hard data on that. At the moment I am not aware of any school bus services that are used in either region for young people to come to the university. Certainly there was the trial in 2006 to 2009 in Gippsland. Again, there was not any data produced in the report which was made available in 2010 on the numbers of people that used the services. For elderly people and people with a range of disabilities, again we do not have any data on how many people would be able to use the

service if it were to be available. I think this is where there is an absolute need to go out and gather some research evidence to back up the need.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** The greatest concern coming forward in this inquiry is the concern that apparently parents have, quite rightly, that their children could be put at risk if others board the existing school bus. Would you be able to comment on what you think the likelihood of that sort of intervention or injury would be, with the tertiary students that you are proposing should first get access?

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** So you are asking me if it is a risk to schoolchildren to have tertiary students on the bus?

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Yes. I mean, that is the concern being expressed by parents, we are told.

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** So some of these tertiary students would be classified as children themselves, and of course some of them would be adults. I do not have any particular expertise in child protection issues, so speaking as a parent myself and as a community member, I can certainly make a comment, but I do not have any particular expertise in this. I was very interested to read many of the other reports that were submitted to the inquiry, and also I considered this matter as a citizen. I also looked at the report that was prepared, so that is the Gippsland school bus flexibility project report, and I did note that everyone who went on the bus needed to provide documentation, an application to be able to access that bus service. It would seem to me that this would provide a lot of assurance to parents with younger children on the bus, that tertiary students on the bus have had some form of vetting, that they would have a police check, that they would have, you know, potentially a working with children check—noting, of course, as I said, that some of these tertiary students are children themselves. So I would feel that that would be a good solution and that the risk is no greater than—my own daughter uses a public bus to go to her school, so I do not perceive that the risk would be any greater for those children on dedicated school buses than for my own daughter who is in a public bus with members of the public.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Yes. I mean, that would seem to be perfectly logical. If you are getting on a bus or a tram in other areas, there is no consideration as to who might be on that particular form of transport with you. And I think what we garnered from the last witness was the fact that if a tertiary student, for instance, or an apprentice was getting on the bus, you know, they would be committed in advance, perhaps, for the term or a six-month period or something, so you would have an idea of who was going on it for a longer period of time. So thank you.

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** I also gathered from the evidence provided by BusVic that there are problems and issues with some bullying on the school buses and that the presence of other students who are almost adults, young adults, and the presence of other adults may in fact reduce this problem as well.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Oh, that is a very good point. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Very interesting indeed. I might pass over to Mr Tarlamis, then Mr Barton. Mr Tarlamis.

**Mr TARLAMIS:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Professor Unsworth. Just in terms of opening up the school bus service to people with mobility and disability issues, and you touched on that a little bit around the need or the availability, and I think it was raised around sort of the cost, I guess the question is about not knowing how much utilisation there would be about it and those questions there. I know in more built-up areas like Ballarat you would have a lot more people wanting to access the services, whereas in smaller, more regional areas, with a lot more small towns, with a lot more distance between them, there may be less demand as such—so less people possibly wanting to access those services, a lot further to travel, so the costs may be more to use those services, unless they were subsidised in some way as well. So I guess they are factors that would need to be considered as well, as to whether or not people would utilise those services. That would all need to be part of the consideration. Also part of the consideration would need to be a school bus service that does not run during school holidays and what you would do during those periods, but also there is factoring in the tight time frames when you are running those distances during school pick-up times and you have to go long distances to get students to schools. If you are adding in that element of those with mobility issues, it will take longer and longer to get people on and off the bus from stations, and that would obviously add to that time as well. I guess they are probably statements rather than questions or anything else, but they are some of the

factors that sort of occur to me that we would need to kind of consider. I am not sure whether you wanted to make comment on any of those.

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** Yes, certainly. I mean, I think dwell times are certainly a consideration for all bus services—you know, there is a schedule to keep. But if we could get just a small number of additional people onto those buses for a very small additional dwell time—I think most people do not take that long to get on the bus. Certainly, these school buses, as we have said, are not going to be able to take people using mobility devices—they are not going to be able to access these buses. However, if we acknowledge that and consider that in the first instance, we might at least be able to get some more older people or some more people with mobility sticks or walking frames on the bus, and that is a significant advantage for their quality of life. It is very difficult to put a price on the additional quality of life for those community members who would be able to uptake the service, acknowledging again that not everyone is going to be able to access it and there will always be people who will complain that they cannot get their mobility scooter on and they cannot access that bus. But what about those people who could access it? It is very difficult to put a price on that for those individuals.

**Mr TARLAMIS:** Absolutely, and it is certainly less of an issue if the buses are running outside of those pick-up and drop-off times as well, where the buses are either not running or running empty, with [inaudible] as well.

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** Yes. One of the issues also that is noted in the Gippsland report is advertising the services and making sure that people are really aware that the service is available. So you mentioned, ‘How many people are going to use it?’. Often it is making sure that people know that they can use the service and that potentially it is a limited service—that it does not run during school holiday times. But again, to not run a service just because it would not be available in school holiday times does not seem like a good use of the resource that is available.

**Mr TARLAMIS:** Well, it may be that it does not run for the duration of the school holiday period but it runs certain days of the week to certain areas and things like that, so that you know that you can schedule your shopping or appointments on those particular days in those particular areas—you can service all areas but not every single day and those sorts of things.

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** Yes. And we also know from services like—for example, you know, in Melbourne we have facilities like Travellers Aid, which enables people to come from rural areas into Melbourne for their medical appointments. One of the things that Travellers Aid have said is that they have a lot of difficulty in getting information out to people in the community to say, ‘Look, hey, we’re here, and you can use this service to support you’. I think it might be the same for the school buses being used by older people and people with disabilities. If they do not know that that service is there for them or that it even is a potential, they do not come out and ask for it, and then they do not get access to it and then people eventually take the service away, like what happened in Gippsland where the trial ended. So you know, we have really got to make sure if this does happen that we really enable people to know it is there and then to use the service.

**Mr TARLAMIS:** Absolutely. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for that. Mr Barton then Mr Quilty.

**Mr BARTON:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Professor Unsworth. Professor, did you do a submission?

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** I did not.

**Mr BARTON:** Okay. I was looking in Teams, and I think Enver actually tries hiding them from me to make it difficult for me.

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** No.

**Mr BARTON:** Thank you for doing the presentation then. I have only got a couple of questions. Have we got any kids in rural Victoria who cannot go to university because they cannot get the transport?

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** Sorry, did you say, ‘Have we got any?’

**Mr BARTON:** Yes. What I am saying is that they have decided not to go because it is just too difficult.

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** Well, it is very difficult to collect data about people who do not come because we do not get them to know that they do not come. As a university we collect data about the students who come to us only. We do know anecdotally from open days that students will come and say that they would like to come to university but that they cannot because they do not have a car or they cannot afford the fuel costs, but we do not have any hard data that people did not come. What we do have is only that data that 6 to 11 per cent of those who are looking at dropping out say it is because the commute is too difficult. So the only data we have is once students come to us.

**Mr BARTON:** I will just say a comment and a question, I think, and I will just say this is some data from the taxi industry. This very talented and good-looking committee, I would have to say, is going to have a look at the multipurpose taxi program, and we know out of that program about 30 per cent are for wheelchairs. This is a school bus program, so we are never going to be able to justify that investment in those, but this sort of leads into other areas where we have got to maintain our wheelchair services throughout rural and regional Victoria. I know there is a shortage—well, a demand for it—as it is now. So do you have any evidence or anything about wheelchair-access vehicles for your people that you have been looking into? Have they been disadvantaged in rural and regional Victoria?

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** I do not have any data specifically for the number of taxis, multipurpose taxis, taxis that are adaptable—

**Mr BARTON:** Sorry, the customers who want the service.

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** For the customers?

**Mr BARTON:** Yes.

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** People with disabilities and older people living in regional communities certainly want to access the multipurpose taxi program, and as you know, there is an inquiry at the moment investigating this service—the whole program. But I am not sure specifically what you are asking me. I do not have any specific information on the number of people who want to access but find it difficult to access the multipurpose taxi program.

**Mr BARTON:** Yes. It is really about people who need wheelchair services and are having to wait an unreasonable amount of time to get them—like, they have to wait for hours.

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** Yes, absolutely. So we certainly do have plenty of anecdotal evidence that there is a dearth of taxis available, that people do have to wait hours and that they are often prioritised quite low by the taxi companies to come and pick up that particular fare. So we do have lots, but it is anecdotal evidence. We do not have any hard numbers, but certainly people report these sorts of things to me frequently, yes. Some taxidrivers are excellent, however, and they do take the time to develop relationships with people in their local community and they know the particular needs of a particular person in a wheelchair. The wheelchairs do need to be tied down with four-point tie-down straps in these vehicles, so that does take extra time and knowledge, and there are many excellent taxidrivers who take the time to do that for clients to get them out into the community.

**Mr BARTON:** Yes, right. I am taking you down for another committee reference.

**The CHAIR:** I think Professor Unsworth will be very helpful in our next inquiry. You are right, Professor Unsworth, our next inquiry is into multipurpose taxis, and someone with your occupational health background would be very able to assist the committee, because you are raising a lot of good points here about equity and access.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Mr Barton is not missing an opportunity, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** But on this inquiry, Mr Barton, do you have a question about the school bus program?

**Mr BARTON:** The school bus program—no, I think the professor has answered all the questions that have been put through, and I have got no more for the professor. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for that. Mr Quilty.

**Mr QUILTY:** I have also had most of my questions answered. If the government was going to invest extra resources into transport for students and for the elderly and disadvantaged in the areas this bus program is talking about, could it be a better use of resources to boost carpooling or ridesharing, particularly using the new technologies available around ridesharing—not necessarily with a big corporate company but using the access link to use existing travel to pool people? You see what I am saying: are there better ways money could be used?

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** I am not an expert by any means in cost analysis of these sorts of issues, so I could not tell you was there a better cost benefit to do another method. However, I think that public buses are already there and being used. We already have a system with known routes in place that people are fairly comfortable with using, and I think that there is more security in a public system than there is for members of the communities that I would be speaking about. People with disabilities, for example. They can feel quite vulnerable when they are alone in a ridesharing situation. So certainly I think there are some advantages—again, it would be difficult to put a price on—for people using a public existing bus service or a school bus service.

**Mr QUILTY:** Are there other significant disadvantages to ridesharing or carpooling that would make it not valuable?

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** Absolutely, because there are many people who would use mobility devices that could not get that mobility device into a rideshare service or a person's vehicle unless it was specially equipped to do so. So, for example, in the taxi system we have those vehicles that are adapted to take wheelchairs, people in scooters, people with mobility limitations. But rideshare cars are completely unknown, and we would have a lot of difficulty with potentially people being able to access those private vehicles.

**Mr QUILTY:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much for that, Professor. Committee members, if anybody has any additional questions, please feel free. Otherwise I might conclude Professor Unsworth's evidence for today.

On that point, Professor Unsworth, it has been very informative. I really appreciate you touching on topics such as school bullying and also the equity and access issues for people with disabilities. I really enjoyed your presentation today. If we were to have any other questions come up that we cannot think of right now, is it okay if we contact you directly?

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** Yes, of course.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Chair, I am just wondering if Professor Unsworth would be able to give us any anecdotal evidence from students who have not continued their education or not started it because of lack of transport access.

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** I could go back to the university and ask for a particular student scenario that I could bring back to you.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Even if it was not obviously mentioning names or anything, but just to give us some sort of evidence that this has been an issue that you have identified.

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** Yes. I mean, certainly we know it is 6 to 11 per cent of students talk about dropping out because of this. I could give you some anecdotal case studies. Is that what you would like?

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Yes, that might be helpful. Chair, do you think?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, that would be fantastic.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, Professor.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Professor. On that note, on behalf of the committee, I thank you for appearing today. It has been a pleasure to have you.

**Prof. UNSWORTH:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, committee members.

**Witness withdrew.**