

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Tuesday 8 August 2023

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Anthony Cianflone

Wayne Farnham

John Mullahy

Dylan Wight

Jess Wilson

WITNESSES

Chris Potaris, Chief Executive Officer, and

Ben Rogers, Manager, Policy and Advocacy, Council on the Ageing Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria.

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

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

While all evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside of this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts and other documents provided to the Committee during the hearing will be published on the Committee's website.

We will do some brief introductions and then we will hand over to you. I am the Chair, Alison Marchant, Member for Bellarine.

Jess WILSON: Jess Wilson, Member for Kew.

John MULLAHY: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

Wayne FARNHAM: Wayne Farnham, Member for Narracan.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

The CHAIR: And Dylan Wight from Tarnet will join us in a moment. Introductions—and if you have got an opening statement or some remarks to make first I will hand to you.

Chris POTARIS: I do. Thank you, Chair. I have got probably just 5 or so minutes of an opening statement, if I may. Good afternoon, and thank you all for the opportunity. My name is Chris Potaris and I am the CEO of Council on the Ageing Victoria and also the CEO of Seniors Rights Victoria. I am joined today by my Policy and Advocacy Manager Ben Rogers. First of all I would like to thank the Chair as well as the wider Committee members and Secretariat for having us here today. We deeply appreciate this opportunity to ensure that the voice and experience of older Victorians are considered in this important Inquiry. Before we dive into the issue I want to take the time to properly introduce ourselves and our roles. Council on the Ageing Victoria, or COTA Victoria, are the leading not-for-profit organisation representing the rights and interests of people aged over 50 in the state. We have represented people aged 50-plus for the better part of 71 years, and we have led government, corporate and community thinking in relation to the positive aspects of ageing. As part of this we also through Seniors Rights Victoria are the key statewide service dedicated to advancing the rights of older people and the early intervention into or prevention of elder abuse in the state. We provide lawyers, advocates, social workers, free information, advice and referral, legal advice, legal casework and a plethora of other supports for older and more marginalised and vulnerable community members throughout the state. Our submission to this Inquiry expressed our concern around the increasing number of people, particularly older people, being killed on the road post pandemic and the anecdotal feedback we are hearing from older Victorians of poor driving behaviour in their communities. However, we see a lot of these issues as continuing trends that existed prior to the pandemic, such as the inability to reduce pedestrian deaths, which predominantly affects older people, and other long-term factors such as infrastructure design.

Before we take your questions, Chair, I do want to take the time to highlight two key trends, if I may, in relation to what we see as major implications for this Inquiry—firstly, ageing. When we talk about vulnerable road users a key cohort of this is undoubtedly older people. While not all older people are vulnerable road users, and we risk being ageist if we take that approach, it is clear that ageing is an important factor around becoming a more vulnerable road user. Ageing as a road user, whether as a pedestrian, driver or passenger, puts you at greater risk for hospitalisation or death when you are involved in an accident. This is certainly partly due to greater frailty from ageing, as well as other issues associated with ageing.

This is being reflected on our roads. In particular, those killed while walking are likely to be older. Up to December 2022, people aged over 70 accounted for 35% of the 646 deaths in Melbourne since 2002, yet they only account for 11.5% of the population. In the last five years alone nearly one in four of all the pedestrians killed were aged over 80, but they represent less than 5% of our population. While older people are

disproportionately affected by road deaths as drivers and passengers, it is not as stark as the pedestrian statistics: in 2022 people over 70 accounted for 31.8% of pedestrian deaths but 16% of all lives lost on the road.

If we acknowledge that ageing has an impact on how vulnerable a road user is, then we need to acknowledge one of the biggest demographic elephants in the room: Victoria is getting older. In 2021 there were almost 1.5 million Victorians aged 60 years or older, 22% of the total population. By 2046, however, that number is expected to rise by around 60% to more than 2.3 million people, or about a quarter of the population. This invariably has huge ramifications for Victorian society. Our use of roads and our road users are no different, but this is not some distant prophecy—we are already seeing more older people on our roads and living with its impact. According to the TAC, we are already seeing more older people on our roads in relation to the number of older drivers that hold a drivers licence. This statistic shows that this has doubled in the last 20 years. In 2019 there were already over 500,000 drivers that were aged over 70 on our roads.

I have a few more comments, Chair, if I may.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Chris POTARIS: The last big factor I would like to discuss in relation to what we are seeing is the relevant return of older people to their normal lives following the COVID-19 pandemic. The drop in lives lost on the road in 2020 was primarily due to older people. That year saw a 31.9% decrease in the number of people over the age of 50 killed on Victorian roads. In comparison the number of people aged under 50 dying on Victorian roads only decreased by 11.1%. This aligns with the experience of organisations such as ours in supporting older people. We have found that some older people have taken longer to return to post-pandemic behaviours, as they have taken extra precautions for their health. The statistics support this. At the time of our submission, the same number of drivers aged over 70—13 to be specific—had died in 2023 as did in the entirety of 2022.

Older people need support to safely resume their lives, but the wider population needs direction to adapt to older Victorians being back on the roads and in their communities. Research indicates that risk-taking behaviour regarding driving increased through the pandemic and that older people we talked to are experiencing it around them. We have heard reports of an array of poor driving skills and behaviour such as speeding and increased mobile use while driving as well as reports of abuse towards older drivers and pedestrians.

Almost in conclusion, Chair, we really see that these two trends are striking at the heart of the issue of old, vulnerable road users. We need to address immediate and long-term solutions to the issue around older people disproportionately dying on our roads and footpaths. Melbourne is not designed to support ageing well, and older Victorians are paying for this with their health and in some cases their lives. The design and infrastructure of the city put older pedestrians in harm's way. Pedestrians and vehicles are brought together in confined space, which leads to poor outcomes. Pedestrian crossing times are too short for some older Victorians with physical issues to get across in time, while the rise of hybrid and electric cars means that older people with vision or hearing issues may not be aware of oncoming traffic, as alluded to by the previous speaker.

We need a fundamental rethinking of how we support walking in Melbourne if we are to protect older Victorians. We, Chair, would like to see positive ageing at the heart of city design going forward, leading to increased separation of pedestrians and vehicles and traffic, more time to enable older Victorians to cross at road crossings and a greater emphasis on highlighting and protecting pedestrians in road design. And lastly, positive ageing in our infrastructure goes beyond just roads—it needs to guide everything. With Victoria getting older on an evidence base, we cannot afford to not prioritise this. So we are advocating, Chair, for positive ageing to be recognised at the core of Victoria's 30-year infrastructure strategy, with consultation recently released on updating this strategy. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Chris, very much, for that. We will ask the Committee members to each ask a question of you, and then if we have got time at the end we will go back around as our discussion evolves. Anthony, I might start with you.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you for your submission, and for appearing. I have actually raised many of your issues earlier on in the hearing—you may have heard or not—but the question I have, and you may want to take this on notice, actually: do you have a breakdown—I could not see it in your submission—of the primary mode of transport that older residents in Victoria primarily use, whether it is a breakdown of being a

pedestrian or a cyclist or a mobility device user or a motorist. Is there a breakdown that you have that you may be able to provide the Committee?

Ben ROGERS: We do not have that on hand, but we can hopefully get as much information as we possibly can to you.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you.

Ben ROGERS: Of course.

The CHAIR: Do you want follow-up, Anthony?

Anthony CIANFLONE: Yes, in that context I am interested to understand what the primary modes of transport are on a regular basis so then that can help inform what goes to your corner around a recommendation around the provision of road design as part of that, whether it is car parking and other infrastructure to support and complement that usage of older people across Victoria.

Chris POTARIS: We would be pleased to provide that to the Committee.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Wayne.

Wayne FARNHAM: Oh, me. We are going this way. Well, I am glad you represent people over 50, because I think I am the only one on the Committee over 50, so that is good. One thing that gets brought up often in general conversation is the retesting of older drivers. I would like to hear your thoughts on that, or is there a specific way or—just your thoughts on that particular issue.

Chris POTARIS: Absolutely. We at the Council on the Ageing and Seniors Rights would be vehemently opposed to any mandating or mandatory testing. We certainly believe that there is probably a plethora of matters in relation to either discrimination or pigeonholing or ageism in relation to that. We have thousands and thousands of members and supporters of our organisations that could be in their late 80s or early 90s and be some of the best drivers you will ever see. We have people in my age group, mid-50s, who may not be able to drive as well. How do you differentiate between that without discriminating or having some ageist approach? So we would be vehemently against that.

Wayne FARNHAM: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Jess.

Jess WILSON: Thank you, Chair. I am interested to get your perspective on potentially where other jurisdictions may be globally, given our changing demographics, where other countries have experienced that before we have, and what they have done in terms of improving road safety for vulnerable users, particularly the elderly, and any initiatives they have put in place that you think we could adopt here in Victoria.

Chris POTARIS: Yes, it is a great question. In our policy-setting capacity, both at a state level and a national level—we are part of federated model as well, so we have national representation at a policy-setting level—there is a distinct lack in Victoria in particular of what you would deem as a co-design-based approach to early planning, not retrospective, reactive sorts of initiatives and planning. Certainly, in the early phases, particularly in light of the imminent rewrite of the infrastructure strategy, groups like us are not consulted with. People are not engaged. Older people are dismissed, particularly the cohort between 60 and 80. I have provided evidence—or at least what I submit as evidence to the Chair and to the Committee today—in relation to statistics that are derived from very comprehensive reports nationally and internationally and there is evidence that we are just not engaging the vulnerable, marginalised, older Victorians, who are growing exponentially. So if you were to take an early, engaged, community-based engagement and education-based approach and factor that into early co-design-based thinking and strategies and planning at a statewide level, I think we would go a long way to addressing some of these key issues and bringing down, invariably, deaths.

Jess WILSON: In terms of thinking about some of the options for the elderly, we have spoken today about accessibility to public transport, for example. Is that an area where you think there could be greater focus from a

government perspective to make sure it is easier for those who are ageing to access public transport safely? At the moment there is a sense that, broadly in the community, it can be difficult to get on public transport, there is not that safety around it. If you are getting on a tram, you are worried that a car might speed through. What are some of the thoughts from your organisation around what we can do in those public transport links?

Chris POTARIS: Yes, again a great question. Accessibility is always a key issue for the older cohorts and older Victorians, but again most of these matters can be addressed initially at a high level by education and awareness. Accessibility issues for older Victorians are something that we will see a significant increase in as we age as an older population, but we found through some specific programs we have run for decades that just engaging and educating them and making them aware of some of the options that are available to them on an informed basis goes a long, long way to either reducing incidents or at least adding some value to their lives in relation to what other options they have. I hope that addresses that.

Jess WILSON: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

John MULLAHY: Thanks, Chair, and thanks, Chris, for your submission and also your statement earlier. You did mention using a positive ageing lens to inform road and infrastructure design. What does that involve, and what are some examples of that?

Chris POTARIS: Yes, thank you. Positive ageing or ageing well are not very popular terms. However, that is our bread and butter. We want to ensure that every government department essentially has a role to play within the scope of what positive ageing means for older Victorians and what ageing well means. Whether it is infrastructure, roads, safety, justice, whatever committee or whatever the Government is looking at at the time, having that positive ageing lens in terms of what does it mean to get older—what are the issues that affect older Victorians? If you narrow that down to the more marginalised, vulnerable older Victorians who either do not have access to that information or might have some accessibility issues or might have some other issues that preclude them from having access to that information, we improve their quality of life. You mentioned aged care homes, and these are very naughty words to mention to the ageing population, ageing in place, ageing at home is really where we are heading as a community. When we run programs or we engage various government departments at every level from minister down, we always ask them when they develop programs or policies or introduce specific initiatives through the communities that they look at it with this lens. What does it mean to age well? What does that mean in terms of the initiatives you are trying to implement throughout your departments? Does that make sense?

Ben ROGERS: I think especially in regard to, say, public transport, or in regard to road design in particular, it is making sure that people are protected, that they feel enabled, they feel safe to do so. For instance, a classic example is keeping pedestrians away from cars. Especially, say, if we look internationally, in regard to most European cities that have low amounts of pedestrian deaths, it is because cars are not near older people. If you want older people to feel safe, if you want them to walk to public transport and to use it, you need to make sure particularly that they are protected—there is a separation between the cars and them. Or, for instance, the classic one that we keep coming back to at the minute is around longer times to cross the roads. You would be surprised how quickly that can go and how much of an insecurity that can be, which then precludes people from engaging in their public life and living their best life, which has ramifications such as social isolation, which means they could go into an aged care facility earlier than intended. I think the key thing for us is that holistic view of this issue—because it is not just about roads, it is about how people live.

Chris POTARIS: Again, if I may finish, when we talk about ageing well, over a two-year period we looked at statistics of older Victorians 65-plus who presented at emergency departments. They represented around 1.8 million people over a two-year period of 8.8 that presented overall. We submit on an evidence base that probably more than half of those presentations could have been avoided just through early engagement, awareness and educational programs and other outreach-based programs that focused on not necessarily the older person but the people around them—their mates, their nephews, their nieces, their sons, their daughters, their professional practitioners. It can be that sort of person who can reach out to these people and make them aware of what options are available to them. It is that sort of assertive outreach capacity. It is all part of ageing well.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Dylan WIGHT: Thanks, Chair. And thanks, Chris, for your submission and your evidence thus far. We have heard through evidence on a couple of different occasions today that older people are disproportionately represented in deaths among vulnerable road users, and within that dataset older people in our CALD communities are again disproportionately represented. I have obviously got a pretty significant multicultural, ageing community within my electorate of Tarneit, so I am just wondering what we can do differently in terms of infrastructure, in terms of education and in terms of really anything to try and reverse that trend amongst our multicultural community.

Chris POTARIS: That is a really important question. Multicultural, culturally and linguistically diverse—CALD—and LGBTQI communities are all marginalised and vulnerable cohorts, particularly when you are putting them in the context of older people. Most, if not all, either do not have access to or do not understand the information that you are providing. There is only one way you can bridge that gap, and that is through education and engagement—and that is directly engaging them.

Dylan WIGHT: In respect to that, is it as simple as providing more material in different languages, or does it go further, to greater face-to-face engagement and making sure that there is a pretty broad understanding?

Chris POTARIS: I am glad you made that distinction. It is certainly the latter. You have to take an assertive outreach lens and literally go into these communities and try and understand how you push those buttons that get them to engage and really buy into what we are trying to teach and what we are trying to express. Again, just disseminating this information is not going to get the message across. You have got to go into the community—so it is assertive outreach.

Dylan WIGHT: Yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I just have a question for you as well. Some of the other witnesses have talked about three pillars—that we cannot just address behaviours, because there is a whole range of issues here with road infrastructure, behaviours, speeding and vehicles. Do you have any insight or data on older Victorians upgrading their cars to newer cars and changing into a more modern car with all those technologies that we all—some of us—enjoy? Have you explored that in any way?

Chris POTARIS: We would have that data but not on hand, Chair.

The CHAIR: No, that is okay.

Chris POTARIS: As we have parked that particular question, we are happy to provide that information, absolutely.

The CHAIR: Yes. Is there anything anecdotally that you might be able to talk to about it?

Ben ROGERS: We do know older road users have older cars, and that is one of the great issues. The RACV just before us talked around those older cars that are no longer being produced being the most dominant cars on our road, and in particular it is older drivers. We do see it in regard to energy as well. The cost-of-living crisis at the minute does really preclude people from going, ‘Actually, I’ll get the new car with all the new safety features.’ Particularly if you think, ‘Maybe I won’t need my car for that much longer. I don’t need a new car. I don’t need to make that expense. I need to make sure my pension goes further,’ you are not going to look for those opportunities, which does mean you are, unfortunately, in an unsafe position, which is a reality we have to deal with—and look to support people in how we can perhaps either change behaviours or think about issues in a different way to consider them.

Chris POTARIS: Cost of living is certainly a big part of that, Chair, in relation to not having the options of upgrading or getting something more special. A lot of our cohort are deciding whether they pay an electricity bill or switch on their heater or put food on their table most of the time.

The CHAIR: We do have a few minutes, so I will open it up to the Committee if there are any follow-up questions that anyone may have.

Anthony CIANFLONE: I can ask one, Chair.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you, Anthony.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you. The point you made earlier about ageing in place and home; I thought that was a really important point. I would like to tie that into the issue of isolation. There is a growing number of older residents across Victoria. In all of our communities respectively isolation is becoming a bigger and bigger issue for many. Merri Health, in my community, made a submission. They said one of their most vulnerable cohorts is the over 2,000 older residents—over 60—who access their services, highlighting transport as a key issue and barrier around accessing those services. I guess my question is: elaborate on why it is so important to make provision for the needs of older Victorians in our transport network infrastructure and system so that we can, in part, help combat isolation and improve their health and wellbeing.

Chris POTARIS: Yes, that is an excellent point. Thank you for raising that. We ran a statewide campaign that initially involved Minister Lizzie Blandthorn. We launched that campaign on 1 June, which is May. The campaign was called ‘Older, Not Alone’. It was a Victorian statewide campaign with which Minister Blandthorn was indirectly involved, as was the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. That pretty much focused on your point, which was social isolation and what we can do to combat that on every front, whether it is going back out in your communities or transport related. It focused on a number of issues that affected older people.

But essentially one of the biggest scourges we have found within our cohort of older Victorians is post-pandemic isolation. A lot of the more marginalised, vulnerable people in particular do not have the supports that they need to be able to address these issues, or we cannot even reach them. This campaign in particular, again with the support of the minister and the department, very much focused on not the older person but absolutely everyone around them. We had slogans like ‘How’s your mate?’, ‘How’s your nan?’, ‘How’s your pop?’—these sorts of slogans. That really went a long way to at least raising awareness in relation to what social isolation is and how absolutely horrendous it could be for older people post pandemic who are still very afraid to go out there and catch public transport and engage. But it is certainly an issue that is not fully addressed. We are at the early stages of at least raising awareness in relation to what social isolation is and how we can combat it.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Jess.

Jess WILSON: Thanks, Chair. One of the themes we have spoken about today is the increase of e-scooters on roads and on sidewalks. I am interested to get your perspectives on what you think the Victorian Government could do in terms of increasing safety when it comes to e-scooters—both privately owned and then of course we have got the platforms that are available in some areas of Melbourne—to protect older pedestrians.

Chris POTARIS: Yes. Thank you for the question. We did a separate submission in relation to that as well and some responses. We support the trial by the Victorian State Government. However, we have raised some genuine concerns in relation to some of the sort of focal points of that trial. What we have found is that, not only through anecdotal evidence but certainly information received from our older Victorians, they are not being consulted and they not being engaged even at the sort of minute level that they need to be in relation to what this trial is about: what e-scooters mean to them, particularly for the more frail people who may be using the footpath, and what the rules are in relation to it—what e-scooter riders can do and what they cannot do—so making them aware of what the law says or what it will say invariably when it is in. There has been lack of consultation is the best way I can put it.

Jess WILSON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: John?

John MULLAHY: Your submission supports more investment in older driver education programs. What are the main challenges faced by older drivers when using the road, and on that, what topics should these education programs cover?

Ben ROGERS: That is a good question. In particular for that, I think we have sort of looked at a couple of great examples, including the VicRoads-funded safer driver program, which we supported in a submission to the Inquiry on the road toll in previous years. In particular what we really want to see there is around advice

particularly to older drivers on how they can feel safe on the roads. Because if you feel safer, you are going to drive safer, quite frankly. In particular, especially in terms of maybe the earlier question around mandatory testing, which we vehemently oppose, it is around, particularly with the driver education courses, going, 'Can you drive safely? Are you in that position? Do you feel enabled? When you consider all these things, even if you take all these safety precautions, do you feel okay to drive?' Because if you do not, that is a conversation you need to perhaps have with your loved ones or your community to work out what that next step for you living in your community looks like.

The other sorts of elements are of course refreshing the rules, which probably have changed since some of our members last did their driving test. It is not groundbreaking stuff. It is just that consistency of information and making sure that people are in an environment where they feel they can learn and come out on the other side going 'Actually, I feel safe on the road so I can continue my life' or going, 'Actually, what's that next step looking like? What do my local public transport options look like?' or often 'Where can I go closer to home?'

Chris POTARIS: And things like more accessible driver education programs through communities, whether it is the local government authorities or it could be a local library or somewhere that is easily accessible by older people who do not necessarily have transport themselves.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your time today and your submission. It has added another perspective to our Inquiry today, so we really appreciate that. Thank you for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.