

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Shepparton—Wednesday 13 September 2023

#### **MEMBERS**

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Anthony Cianflone

Wayne Farnham

John Mullahy

Dylan Wight

Jess Wilson

#### **WITNESSES**

Senior Constable Mitchell Bull, Proactive Policing Unit,

Acting Inspector Dean Williams, Tasking and Coordination, Coolheads Young Driver Program, Shepparton Police.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the public hearings 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 is being recorded by Hansard. 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 also be published on the Committee's website.

Thank you so much for your time today; we really appreciate it. I will do quick introductions, and then we might go to you. I am happy for you to have any opening statements or talk a little bit about the program that you have got running here in Shepparton, and then we will have some questions. I am Alison, Member for Bellarine.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** You know who I am: Kim, local Member for Shepparton. Welcome.

**John MULLAHY:** John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Dylan Wight, Member for Tarneit.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

**Jess WILSON:** And Jess Wilson, Member for Kew.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I might hand to you.

**Acting Inspector Dean WILLIAMS:** Acting Inspector Dean Williams is my name. I am just filling in as Tasking and Coordination inspector. The Shepparton Local Area Commander Bruce Simpson would normally support this program and that sort of stuff, but most of the staff, Mitch and that sort of stuff, come under me as well.

**Senior Constable Mitchell BULL:** My name is Senior Constable Mitchell Bull, and I am a member of the Shepparton proactive unit. Just to give you a bit of a run-down about the Cool Heads program, it was developed in 2008 with the objective and motivation of removing the devastating impact caused by fatal and serious injury collisions on our road. This program was initially developed in the Greater Shepparton area and is now a permanent fixture on the calendar for the Mitchell, Benalla and Shepparton areas. The program is not about teaching our young people how to drive; it is about highlighting the consequences of distraction and risk-taking while driving and is designed to improve the attitude of young drivers on our roads. The Cool Heads program is a Victoria Police initiative. It now runs twice a year in Shepparton, once in Seymour and once in the Benalla area, where participants invest 2 hours in a program that incorporates road trauma visuals, messages and speakers. The speakers often share their road trauma experiences, as well as other emergency services workers, magistrates, offending drivers and road trauma victims. The support of our community partners is crucial in this program's success, as it relies on other service providers, including emergency services, councils, education providers, sporting organisations and local media, which has helped maintain this program over the past 15 years.

It is a sad fact that many families in our community suffer from the legacy left with them by road trauma. Courageous victims volunteer their time at this program to speak, as they are passionate about preventing other families from similar suffering. Death or serious injury of local young people on our roads has a devastating impact on our communities and ripples throughout friends, local communities, sporting clubs and schools. This program challenges drivers, before it is too late, to take the opportunity to make an important decision about their attitudes to driving, as it is a reality that 16- to 25-year-old drivers have the highest risk of being killed or seriously injured on our roads. Cool Heads focuses the audience's attention on the devastating impacts that road trauma has on our lives, and it aims to motivate drivers to reduce driver distraction each time they get behind the steering wheel or in a passenger seat, even for a moment, and consider that it could happen to them.

The Cool Heads program is not complex; the challenge is to run a sustainable program to address what the generational road safety issue is. Every day new young drivers gain access to our roads and expose themselves to the possible consequences of road trauma. The program strives to give young drivers the information required to make informed decisions about their driving behaviour and attitude before it is too late. My role in the program is to draw sustainable involvement in the program from all sectors of the community, including emergency services, victims, community partners and, most importantly, young people. Our success at reducing road trauma is only limited by the size of the audience that shares the message. The promotion of this program is critical, as it benefits from strong-standing, consistent support from local media. The Victoria Police Cool Heads logo and name are well known within the local Shepparton community, and it generates attendance and support for the program. It has now become a rite of passage for many new local drivers on our roads and young drivers to attend this program with parents and guardians. The program is also linked in with the local Magistrates' Court, and consistent delivery of the program to this court has produced a high-quality program. After 15 years it has become very popular with magistrates as part of a sentencing program; they sentence young drivers to attend this program as part of their behaviour bonds or findings of the court.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Thank you so much. Kim, I might go to you first.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Thank you. Thank you so much. I see it is advertised in today's *Shepparton News* for November—good timing with that, and well done. I know the program really, really well. I am very interested in: what is the most common risk taken by young drivers, and was there a change following the pandemic? Were there any changes in young drivers' behaviour following the pandemic?

**Acting Inspector Dean WILLIAMS:** Not generally, no. I do not think so, no. It is that small sort of percentage of that population, and they are probably not the ones that are going to—unless court ordered—attend the Cool Heads program. There is certainly a lot more risk-taking amongst a small percentage of young people, but that is across the board in rural and metro. We are probably a little bit luckier here that we do not have it as significantly as our metro counterparts.

**The CHAIR:** Interesting. Is that all, Kim?

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Yes. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** John.

**John MULLAHY:** Thanks. I learned to drive probably 23-odd years ago around regional Victoria at Meredith, Geelong and Ballarat, and so I was just wondering what unique challenges young drivers have on regional roads today and what you find is the best way to engage young people.

**Acting Inspector Dean WILLIAMS:** You have probably hit the nail on the head in relation to how far you had to drive living in the country. Young people have to do that—they go to university, sports and that sort of stuff, and it all involves travel. There is not a tram, a train or something that we can jump onto. They are on the road for considerably more time, so there is that higher risk of something happening. That is probably the most unique thing, I think: they just spend more time in their cars.

**John MULLAHY:** How do you engage with that young cohort?

**Acting Inspector Dean WILLIAMS:** Mitch has sort of touched on most of the people. It is through our schools. Our sporting organisations really support it. The Goulburn Valley football league and the KDL football league—most of their under-17 netballers and footballers all come through the program. We usually have a large one in the middle of the year that coincides with that sporting area. The court certainly has a number of court-appointed people that have to attend. Some of those will come from Gippsland. You will have a magistrate who is on a rotation who will know about the program, and we have had some people who have had to come from there. They got back safely, which was good. It is just engaging where we can – media, that sort of stuff, and just through other organisations really.

**John MULLAHY:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Dylan.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Thanks, Chair. We have heard about distraction whilst driving increasing and being a real issue post pandemic. How much of an issue is that amongst young drivers, and what appears to be driving that? What is the reason for it?

**Acting Inspector Dean WILLIAMS:** It is social media, no doubt. You have got to remain connected when you are young person—that is their thoughts, I would think. We have AirPods and that sort of stuff, so there is all that other stuff that is a distraction whilst driving. That is something we highlight. With the partners we have, the MCI, major collision unit, come up. We have a guest speaker from there at every one of our Cool Heads—they have supported it right through. They are normally telling stories of lived experiences in relation to distraction, speed, those sorts of things and that risk-taking, and then just detailing what the consequences of those actions are going to be—or could be, I suppose; hopefully they do not—and just trying to change that behaviour.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Yes. So do you think it is as simple as just having more technology at your hands, people are just using it?

**Acting Inspector Dean WILLIAMS:** Yes, definitely. Yes, yes. You could drive across the causeway now and watch five people not concentrating or looking at you.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Yes. Okay. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Jess.

**Jess WILSON:** Thanks, Chair. We have heard a lot about different road safety education programs, and I think this certainly sounds like one we would love to see rolled out right across the state. What sort of support do you have in terms of funding for this? Is this run purely by Victoria Police out of Shepparton, or is there broader funding that you have access to or would like access to?

**Acting Inspector Dean WILLIAMS:** Funding would be great.

**Jess WILSON:** And, sorry, just to add to that, I suppose the rollout of the program—do you proactively go to schools, and schools then work with you to partner to provide it? Obviously sporting clubs, you have mentioned. How far and wide can you roll this out using existing organisations, particularly if there was greater funding to assist?

**Acting Inspector Dean WILLIAMS:** I think it certainly could be easily rolled out. Our funding pretty much comes from the courts, so the courts support us with donations, basically, from different offences from people just through their sentencing. That is where all of our funding comes from. We get some of the in-kind stuff. Our local media are great and really promote the Cool Heads when we have them on, so that is all just pretty much in-kind and just supporting that. It is those guest speakers—we have got Ambulance Victoria, the MCIU, we have got the local Shepparton Search and Rescue, the Magistrates Court, so all those people who just give a perspective on road policing and how just a little change in behaviour might assist in someone being safe on the roads.

**Jess WILSON:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Anthony.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thanks, Chair. Thank you for appearing and thank you for your work, which is very important and very much appreciated and acknowledged. My question goes to young offenders. How have young driving offenders reacted to your program, and do you have any indication, any statistics or any research, around the role that your program has played to help reduce repeat offenders or help prevent dangerous driving behaviour around potential first-time offenders? Is there any sort of analysis around that you may have available, or is it anecdotal?

**Acting Inspector Dean WILLIAMS:** Yes, more anecdotal. I would like to do it. I have got intel and worked out a way of doing it, but it is hard when you have got people who volunteer for the program. The court-approved people—we could probably look at to see what their offending post the offence is. Most of the feedback we get is from parents and some of the participants. I got my car serviced the other day, and a lady recognised me from emceeding the last one and mentioned that her son had spoken to her about changing her

behaviour because it was foggy that morning, and he was a participant at it. So that was good feedback to get. Again, yes, it would be good to do some analysis about it, but it is difficult when we are not getting names. We do surveys, and all the surveys are very positive, again, from the participants, but, yes, an actual analysis of it would be good, but obviously the funding and that sort of stuff for that as well.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** No worries. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I have a question about the risk-taking behaviours that you might be seeing. We have heard about red lights, drink and drug driving—can you talk a little bit about some of that risky behaviour you are seeing in your local community?

**Acting Inspector Dean WILLIAMS:** Yes, the ones that you have mentioned. There is that peer pressure, I suppose, and I think it is intergenerational as well. Often drivers will repeat what they have grown up with and stuff like that, so probably in Shepparton we have got a little bit of a culture. We have the Springnats here; we have that sort of stuff. Often young people get a car for their 18th and 21st in some of the community members that we have here, so it is probably a little bit of that hoon behaviour that we do see. Ultimately they will highlight and we will focus on those areas, but a lot of that stuff is around the distraction. I think the laws in relation to not having too many people in a car are quite good, but difficult in the country as well where there is no transport and things like that, so they spend more time ferrying people back and forward as that designated driver. But yes, hooning and distraction I think would be the most.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. We have heard evidence about how during the pandemic police resources were elsewhere—they were doing sort of pandemic-related activities—and that there have been people taking more risky behaviour because they do not think they are going to get caught. Have you seen any of that in the regions?

**Acting Inspector Dean WILLIAMS:** Probably not as much here. We got a fair focus and got support in relation to the pandemic, so we had a lot of police presence here. And with the curfews there just were not people on the road other than those going, you know, to and from work or essential services. But pretty much post the pandemic I think we have just gone back to generally what we had previously—no significant change.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, right. Is there anyone else with any other questions? We have just got a few minutes.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** I was just going to ask, just touching on us being quite unique in the sense that we have all these satellites towns around us—and we know that we commute on regional roads compared to our metropolitan partners, where they are basically travelling in the city. Their transport is very different to what we do. So with this program, I am really so grateful we run it, because it does help. Is there a need to escalate that? The stats are still growing. We are still having high levels of fatalities. Is that one of the main things that perhaps you are focusing on, just being complacent on those roads and not perhaps tuning into the intersections you are coming up to? I do not know how we do that, but I am just really concerned. I think there is just this lapse of concentration a lot of the time because they are out on open roads and they tend to sometimes think that, you know, they are just cruising along, and suddenly they are at an intersection they are not expecting. I just feel that that is a really red flag for us in our regions compared to other stats across the state. It is about regional roads and just that lack of concentration or knowledge of the roads. Is there a gap in the program that could enhance that further, or do you think you are hitting the mark on that?

**Acting Inspector Dean WILLIAMS:** I think from our point of view the young people that we are attracting to this particular program are all sort of local and things like that. A lot of the issues that you are talking about are generally people not from local areas. We still have local people, obviously, die on local roads—that is certainly significant—but a lot of the ones that we are seeing out in those country intersections are probably more people from other places. You know, some of our bigger ones have been international.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Okay. Visitors and stuff.

**Acting Inspector Dean WILLIAMS:** Yes.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** I know there was an incident of a local, I think it was a Katandra West boy, travelling home and hitting a tree. I mean, that is different. It is a road that he travels every single day.

**Acting Inspector Dean WILLIAMS:** Yes.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** And going to a 21st birthday out at a farm at Bunbartha, needing to jump in the car, and they have put five kids in a car, and they head out on a road that they are not used to. I suppose I am just thinking of a couple of incidents I have heard of. Of course they are not going to probably be high stats that you would consider to be at the level I am probably alarming them to, but yes, I just worry about the transportation being different on regional roads. And we do not have the transport opportunities. We have talked about buses, and transport is very lax here.

**Acting Inspector Dean WILLIAMS:** Yes. Certainly back in 2008, when we started, we had a lot of the young people that were statistics, basically. That is what it was. But I would certainly say that we are not over-represented like we were back then since we have run this program.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Okay.

**Acting Inspector Dean WILLIAMS:** But, yes, it is certainly about that driving. And we talk about driving to conditions and all that sort of stuff, and I think the 120 hours—there are a lot of things since this probably started that have improved that gap for those young people I think, yes.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Well done.

**The CHAIR:** I am going to sneak in one more. Something that has also been raised in the hearings is reviewing your knowledge of the road rules. I am just wondering about your thoughts on maybe when you renew your licence if you should re-sit a test or something like that. What are your thoughts on people's knowledge of road rules?

**Acting Inspector Dean WILLIAMS:** Yes. It is probably something that comes up quite a bit, and it is more in the media. Mitch—they do a lot of the programs in the school, so he might be able to speak in relation to that.

**Senior Constable Mitchell BULL:** With the programs through the proactive unit that we discuss with young people, whether it is the year 9s and 10s that are just about to get their learners or going up to the year 12s that are getting their probationary licences, a lot of the discussion is around the road rules, and there are some road rules that some people in this room would not be aware of. There are some laws and legislation and some requirements, but discussing those with the senior schoolkids when they are about to get their licence—or the young people, sorry—they have a lot more of an idea than if we were to approach anybody out on the street and have a discussion with those that have held their licence for 20, 30, 40 years. You will actually find that the young people know the law a lot more than what the older people do, and again it is a generational thing that they have grown up with media, social media. They are aware of incidents that have happened in the local media and about some of the laws and legislation, whereas a lot of the older members of our community that have held their licence for some time may not be aware of that. So it certainly would be beneficial, and it is about obviously the education, the local media, Victoria Police and all the stakeholders as well trying to share the exact same message and being able to get that message out in a multitude of different ways that reach everybody in the community, not just selected groups.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much for your time today. We really appreciate you coming and answering our questions. We could get a really good sense of what is happening, and it is great to hear about this program. Thank you very much for your time.

**Witnesses withdrew.**